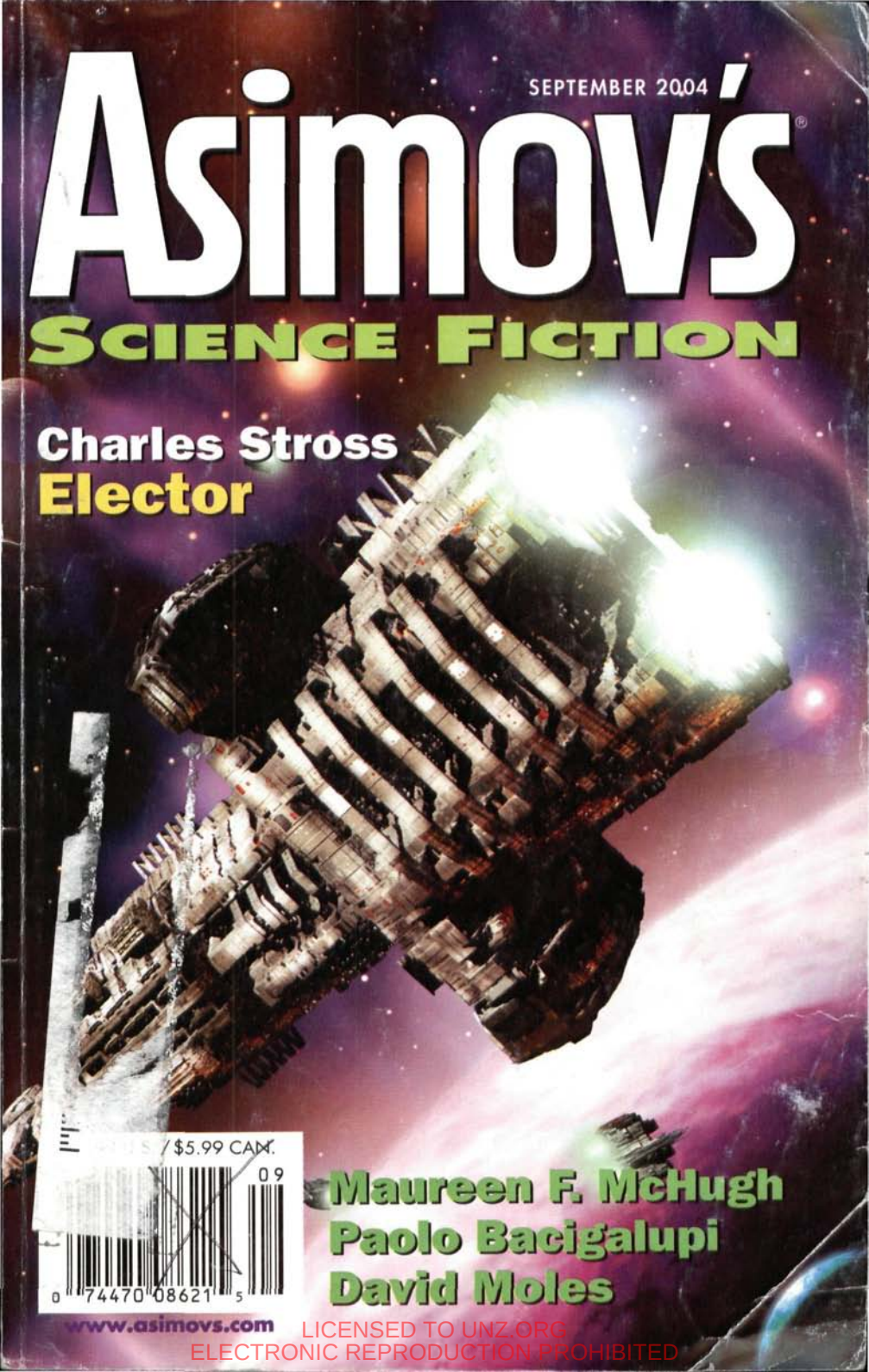

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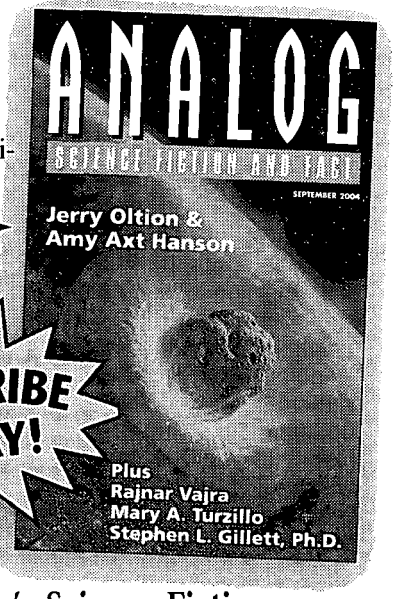

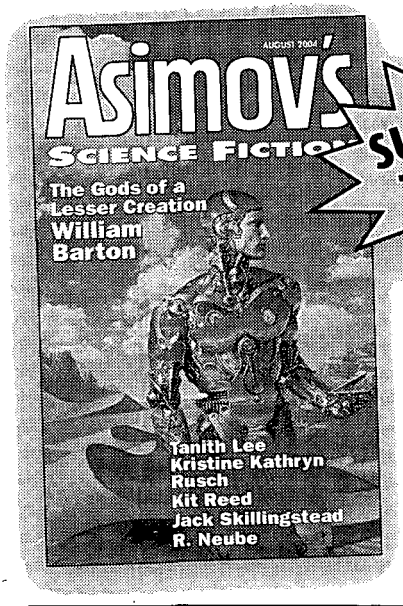

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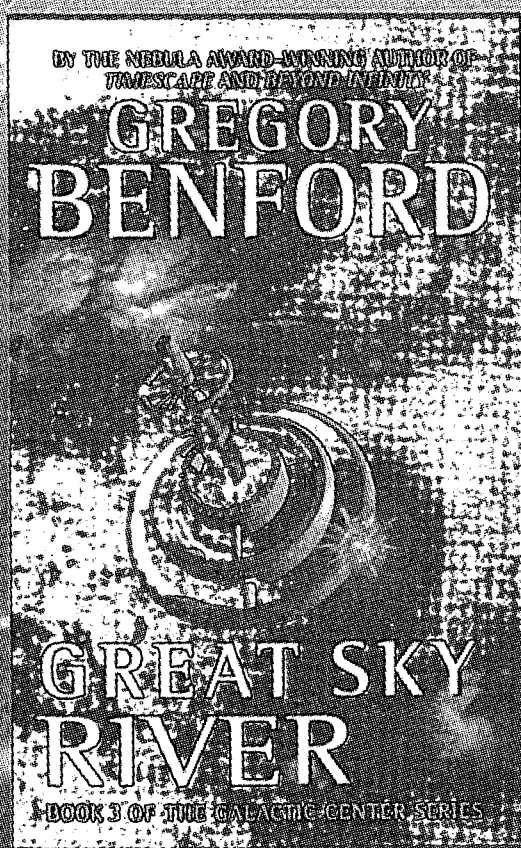

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SEPTEMBER 2004

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(Whole Number 344)

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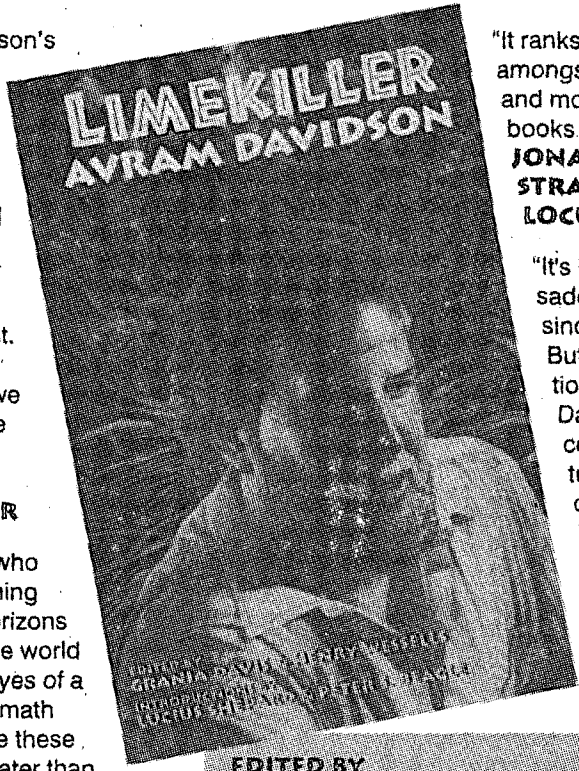

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

ONCE MORE INTO SPACE (MAYBE)

Suddenly talk of space exploration is back in the headlines—more or less. But rather less than more, I'm afraid.

It's been pretty slow slogging out on the space frontier these past five years. We did send the space shuttle up pretty regularly for a while, but those missions, which never were intended to get very far from Earth in the first place, seemed merely to be going through repetitive activities, and then the whole enterprise came to an ugly halt when the shuttle *Columbia* exploded in flight last year as it was making its landing approach. As of now no resumption of shuttle flights has been announced. And the sixty billion dollars International Space Station, understaffed and with no visible scientific program in progress, seems to be, well, just spinning its wheel.

As for lunar exploration, no one in NASA seems to be even thinking about doing that any more. Who could have imagined, back there in 1969 when Neil Armstrong was coming down the ladder of Apollo XI to take that first small step for a man on the surface of the Moon, that manned lunar exploration would stop in its tracks a couple of expeditions later? Here we are, thirty-five years later, and the excitement of following a spaceship from Earth on its way to the Moon is something that only us older folks remember. For the rest of you—including, I suspect, about half the readers of this magazine—the landings on the Moon are something out of ancient history, the way the assassination of President McKinley was for me when I was a high-school student fifty-odd years ago. I've just been looking at an article by a NASA official in the 1970 almanac that predicts the imminent "establishment of a semi-permanent lunar base, housing six to twelve men who would rotate home at six-month intervals. . . . By the 1980s a lunar base might be established that could support eighteen to twenty-four men for as long as a few years. By the turn of the century, a fifty- to a hundred-man lunar colony is possible." Well, the century has turned, and that colony on the moon remains something out of a Heinlein novel. We don't seem to hear anything from NASA about lunar colonies any more.

Such space exploration as has taken place has involved unmanned vehicles that go off somewhere and either do or don't succeed in sending back anything valuable. Most of them arouse no public interest whatever, or at best just a little, and not for very long. Pretty pictures of the moons of Jupiter and Saturn may give a thrill to the likes of Larry Niven and Joe Haldeman and thee and me, but for the general public they're just a one-night wonder on the evening news, with none of the impact that a manned expedition used to create. We don't even know the names of the vehicles that go forth these days. Do you remember, you old-

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all the early space probes and
ellites? There was *Sputnik,* of
rse—no one who heard the
ws of Russian space success that
in October 1957 will ever for-
it. *Vanguard, Explorer, Discov-*
r; Pioneer III, which discovered
Van Allen layer in 1958, and
neer IV, which went zooming
st the Moon the following year
d took up a solar orbit, and
riner II, which got within twen-
one thousand miles of Venus in
62, and *Ranger* and *Surveyor*
l all the rest. But we take space
granted nowadays. Like many
you, I subscribe to a satellite-
ed television service. HBO and
owtime and PBS and CNN come
ne from an orbiting gizmo some-
ere beyond the stratosphere,
t as the writers for *Astounding*
ence Fiction said they would
k in 1942. Do I know the name
he satellite that beams the pic-
es my way? Do I know who
nched it, or when? No and no
l no.

Only the biggest of space spec-
ulars get our attention, now,
l those have been few and far
ween of late. Recently, though,
ere have been stirrings of re-
wed interest in space explo-
ion, with much of the talk in-
ving our red neighbor Mars.
rs has been the center of fasci-
ing speculations since the nine-
nth century, when the Italian
ronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli
covered long grooves that he
led *canali*—"channels"—on the
rtian surface; *canali* can also
an "canals," though, and the
lespread assumption grew that
rs, even then known to be a
sert planet, was crisscrossed
h the irrigation canals of an in-

vocal proponents of this theory was the New England astronomer Percival Lowell, who argued that Mars not only was inhabited, but that the Martian civilization was older and more advanced than our own. By the turn of the last century H.G. Wells had given us *The War of the Worlds,* the prototypical invaders-from-Mars novel, and from 1912 onward Edgar Rice Burroughs, who would become famous later as the creator of Tarzan, spawned about a dozen swashbuckling adventure novels involving an Earthman, John Carter, among the desert tribesmen of Barsoom, as the Martians call their own world —a fantastic place of ferocious swordsmen of various races with green, black, or yellow skins and lovely princesses who, although they reproduced by laying eggs, were mysteriously interfertile with *Homo sapiens* of Earth. And as recently as 1938 Orson Welles's radio adaptation of the H.G. Wells novel convinced millions of Americans that invaders from Mars had actually landed near Trenton, New Jersey.

Well, no one today expects Martians to invade us. But the planet is full of mysteries. There seems to be ice there; is there any liquid water? Are there any algae or bacteria? Was there once enough water on Mars to support higher forms of life? We do wonder. Mars can offer vital information about the origin of life and, perhaps, about how a world's life comes to its end. But most recent attempts to get answers to these problems have ended in failure. The *Mars Climate Orbiter* vanished in September 1999 as it was about to land. The *Mars Polar Lander* and its two probes

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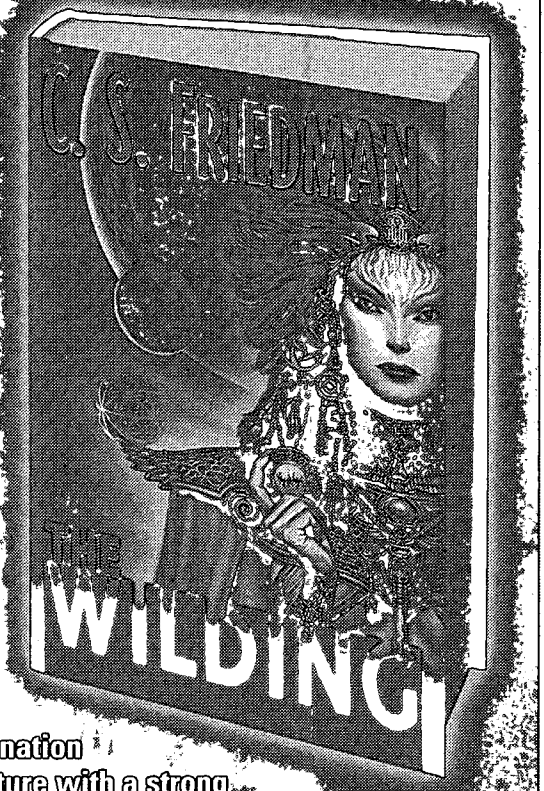

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likewise made inexplicable disappearances three months later. We did get the plucky twenty-four-pound *Pathfinder Rover* down safely in 1997, and millions of us delightedly watched it scuttle around some forbidding desert landscape, but that was the only such success of recent times, and the *Pathfinder*'s path took it over only 328 feet of the Martian surface. As I write this in the opening days of 2004 a new three-pronged attempt to land robot explorers on Mars is approaching its culmination. One of the three prongs, Europe's *Beagle II,* is already bent, but *Spirit,* the first of two American roving landers, did make a safe landing in Gusev Crater near what looks like an ancient lakebed and is sending back color photos already. The fate of the other, *Opportunity,* will be known a couple of weeks after I turn this column in.

And just yesterday—though it will be months in the past when you read this—President Bush lit a firecracker under the sleepy NASA bureaucracy with a stirring call for dramatic new American space ventures in the decades ahead. He proposes relegating the shuttle program to history within the next six years and designing a new vehicle capable of ferrying astronauts to a permanent lunar base that will serve, eventually, as the takeoff point for manned expeditions to Mars. In the past thirty years, he said, no human has ventured more than 386 miles into space, roughly the distance from Washington to Boston. "It is time for America to take the next step," he said.

This should come as no surprise. The first President Bush, after all, called for a manned landing on Mars in 1989, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the first *Apollo* lunar landing. That notion never got anywhere, mainly because of budgetary concerns; but, as we have seen in other contexts, the second President Bush sometimes has a way of finishing the work that his father left undone.

Can we send a manned expedition to Mars? Should we?

The issue of expense arises, and also that of the impact of such a long mission on the physiology of the explorers. They will absorb punishing radiation during the long trip unless properly shielded, and a prolonged stay in space of that sort will jeopardize their bone mass as well. But Dr. Robert Zubrin, founder of the space-advocacy group called the Mars Society, thinks we need to attempt it rather than settle for being confined to our home planet for all the rest of eternity; that we can do it at a cost of no more than forty billion dollars or so—chicken feed, in current Federal budgetary terms; and that a way can be found around the physiological issues and other technical problems. His idea involves a series of stages, beginning with unpiloted vehicles. The first to set down on Mars would be parked there to be used as the return vehicle for the explorers; later vehicles would bring supplies, tools, prefabricated habitats, and fuel for the eventual trip home; finally the explorers themselves would arrive for a prolonged stay in which they would experiment with developing ways to live off the land on an indefinite basis. Cute little robotic Rovers can discover a great deal, but only actual ambulatory human scientists can exercise the sort of on-site judgment that we need here. And, of course, consider the tremendous

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worldwide interest that the sight of human spacefarers walking around on the surface of the red planet would engender.

Timothy Ferris, another space advocate, also looks favorably on the idea of a Mars expedition, but thinks we should return to the Moon first, setting up a station there where our astronauts can master the techniques of living for months or years on another world before making the longer jump to Mars. Fuel for a future Mars expedition, and perhaps metal to be used in the construction of a Mars habitat as well, could be mined on the Moon and stored in orbit, a much cheaper proposition than lifting it all the way from our high-gravity planet. And the whole thing could be paid for by setting up solar-power collectors that would ship electricity via tightly focused microwave beams to consumers on Earth.

But will we go back to the Moon before long? Will we dare to venture onward to Mars? Or will we continue to limp along with a token space program of shuttle flights to a space station that is quite literally going nowhere and the occasional launching of underfinanced and undersized unmanned probes that often fail to reach their destinations? Already the political objections to a Mars mission are being raised—"We need the money for social programs right here"—and a long, grinding battle lies ahead as space advocates try to convince their opponents that it is possible for a government to spend money on other things than Medicare and social programs. (In the 2004 Federal budget, 34 percent of the cash goes for Social Security, Health and Human Services, the Labor Department, etc., and just 1 percent for NASA. This may be wholesome and heartwarming but it is also terribly unimaginative: a society that spends its money only on its own comfort is one that is turning in on itself in a dangerously self-centered way.)

Meanwhile, next month, I want to look beyond the basic idea of once more sending astronauts to the Moon, or even to Mars, and talk about some very much farther-out proposals for the renewed exploration of space. ○

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18TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo: Jennifer A. Hall

Asimov's breakfast party-goers from left to right:
Gardner Dozois, Robert Silverberg, and Sheila Williams

It's time to tell you the winners of the *Asimov's Science Fiction* Annual Readers' Award poll, which is now in its eighteenth year. As always, these were your choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that you—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 2003. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, as always, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' poll conducted by *Locus*. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

BEST NOVELLA

1. **ARIEL; LUCIUS SHEPARD**
2. The Empress of Mars; Kage Baker
3. Just Like the Ones We Used to Know; Connie Willis
4. Benjamin the Unbeliever; Allen M. Steele
5. The Green Leopard Plague; Walter Jon Williams
6. Off on a Starship; William Barton
7. Looking Through Lace; Ruth Nestvold
8. Curator; Charles Stross
9. Margaux; Walter Jon Williams
10. Welcome to Olympus, Mr. Hearst; Kage Baker

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BEST NOVELETTE

1. **THE BELLMAN; JOHN VARLEY**
2. Shepherded by Galatea; Alex Irvine
3. Bernardo's House; James Patrick Kelly
4. The Madwoman of Shuttlefield; Allen M. Steele
5. Only Partly Here; Lucius Shepard
6. Nightfall; Charles Stross (tie)
6. Legions in Time; Michael Swanwick (tie)
7. The Reign of Terror; Robert Silverberg
8. Touching Centauri; Stephen Baxter
9. The Man from Somewhere; Jack Williamson
10. The Path of the Transgressor; Tom Purdom

BEST SHORT STORY

1. **COYOTE AT THE END OF HISTORY; MICHAEL SWANWICK**
2. Robots Don't Cry; Mike Resnick
3. June Sixteenth at Anna's; Kristine Kathryn Rusch (tie)
3. The Long Way Home; James Van Pelt (tie)
4. Dead Worlds; Jack Skillingstead
5. Suitable for the Orient; Karen Traviss (tie)
5. Big Ugly Mama and the *ZK*; Eleanor Arnason (tie)
6. Under the Lunchbox Tree; John Kessel
7. Nimby and the Dimension Hoppers; Cory Doctorow
8. The Hibernators; Brian W. Aldiss
9. Tycho and the Stargazer; Liz Williams
10. Morlock Chili; Lawrence Person

BEST POEM

1. **ALTERNATE HISTORY; MAUREEN F. MCHUGH**
2. Etiquette with Your Robot Wife; Bruce Boston
3. The Dark Man; Joe Haldeman
4. Eight Things Not to Do When the Alien Steps Out of Its Saucer; Bruce Boston (tie)
4. My Night with Aphrodite; Tim Pratt (tie)
5. Memory Man; Ian Watson
6. When Burning off Fingerprints Is No Longer Enough; Cathy Tacinelli
7. Moonbase Alpha's Wish List; G.O. Clark
8. Illusion's Lure; Geoffrey A. Landis (tie)
8. Still Life, with Frog; Tim Pratt (tie)
8. When the Aliens Ask of Breakfast; Amy Miller (tie)
9. The First Living Skyscraper Copes with an Earthquake; Mario Milosevic (tie)
9. Old Robots Calculate Their Options; Bruce Boston (tie)
10. The Man Who Lives in the Attic; Bruce Boston

Continued on page 50

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

TIME TRAVEL

stranded

I got this odd spam last year; maybe you did too. Apparently it showed up in a lot of inboxes, looking something like this:

> Hello,
>
> I'm a time traveler stuck here in 2003. Upon arriving here my dimensional warp generator stopped working. I trusted a company here by the name of LLC Lasers to repair my Generation 3 52 4350A watch unit, and they fled on me. I am going to need a new DWG unit, preferably the rechargeable AMD wrist watch model with the GRC79 induction motor, four I80200 warp stabilizers, 512GB of SRAM and the menu driven GUI with front panel XID display.

The time traveler continues:

> In terms of payment: I don't have any Galactic Credits left. Payment can be made in platinum gold or 2003 currency upon safe delivery of unit.

At the time I thought this was a clever hoax and that its loopy specificity was a comment on the rubber science we skiffy writers so casually deploy. Alas, the truth is both sadder and darker. It seems, according to **Wired News** <*http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,60141,00.html*> that the perpetrator is a delusional twenty-two-year-old from Woburn, Massachusetts, who claims to have sent nearly a hundred million copies of this bizarre email.

But what if he really were from the future?

Fermi's question

The great physicist **Enrico Fermi** <*http://www.nobel.se/physics/laureates/1938/fermi-bio.html*> gave his name to a paradox that continues to bedevil those involved in the search for extraterrestrial life. If advanced civilizations are common, as some believe, Fermi asked, "Where are they?" The fact that no ET has introduced itself to President Bush (that we know of) would seem to be a compelling argument for the proposition that we are alone in the universe. But maybe not. If, as we saw in the previous installment, faster than light travel is either impossible or incredibly difficult, then any number of civilizations could be flourishing in the distant reaches of our galaxy and we might never know. Of course, the Fermi Paradox also applies to time travel. If it were possible, then where are all the tourists from the future?

For reasons that escape me, the

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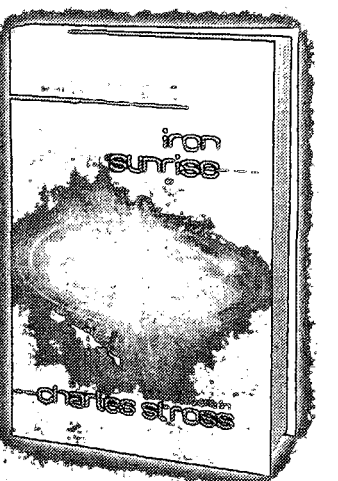

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science of FTL has always been more respectable than the science of time travel. But when serious-minded people like physicist **Kip Thorne** <*http://www.cco.caltech.edu/~kip*> took a careful look at both possibilities, it turned out that they were very much related. **Einstein's Theory of General Relativity** <*http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/einstein/relativity*> tells us that time is part of space, so that if we find some way to warp space, we will also have found a way to warp time.

For a primer on this, check out the website **NOVA** <*http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova*> put up as a companion to its episode **Time Travel** <*http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/time*>. Science writer **John Gribben** <*http://www.biols.susx.ac.uk/home/John_Gribbin*> sets out the issues in rather more detail in **Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Time Travel** <*http://www.biols.susx.ac.uk/home/John_Gribbin/timetrav.htm*>. He points out that the key to traveling through time as well as jumping through hyperspace is wormhole engineering. I won't rehearse the difficulties inherent in creating such a transportation system other than to note that it would take the total energy output of many, many stars just to open the wormhole. String theory physicist and science writer **Michio Kaku** <*http://www.mkaku.org/*> gave an **interview** <*http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?chanID=sa004&articleID=0000AB94-4016-1FBE-801683414B7F0000*> to **Scientific American** <*http://www.sciam.com*> last fall in which he offered the most up-to-date assessment of the plausibility of time travel. In addition to wormhole engineering, he mentioned quantum teleportation. "This is not science fiction anymore. Now, to be real, we're not talking about sending Captain Kirk across space and time. But we are talking about sending individual photons across space. In a few decades, maybe we will teleport the first virus, if the virus consists of a few thousand molecules."

But by far the most comprehensive site about the science of time travel is **Time Travel** <*http://freespace.virgin.net/steve.preston/Time.html*> put up by two British professors, S. Preston and K.D. Hammonds. These scientists acknowledge the staggering technical difficulties involved in time travel, but are nonetheless true believers. As they write, "This web site is devoted to the explanation of why time travel is possible in both a forward and backward direction. We discuss many of the common objections to time travel and we show that these objections are without foundation."

One thing that comes clear from perusing all of these sites is that no lone genius is going to whip up a time machine in his private laboratory. If time travel is to be achieved, it will demand almost unimaginable expenditures of energy, material and, well, *time*.

Wells's kids

Arguments could be made for **Charles Dickens** <*http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/Dickens.html*> having written the first time travel story in 1843 and calling it **A Christmas Carol** <*http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/19/frameset.html*> or for **Mark**

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Twain <*http://www.boondocksnet.com/twainwww*> having written it in 1889 and calling it **A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court** <*http://www.literature.org/authors/twain-mark/Connecticut*>, but these would not be very convincing arguments, in my opinion. Pride of place goes to **Herbert George Wells** <*http://www.hgwellsusa.50megs.com*> for dreaming up **The Time Machine** <*http://www.online-literature.com/wellshg/timemachine*> in 1895. What makes this the first science fiction time travel story is that the Time Traveler actually *builds* his machine. He is not surprised to find himself scooting back and forth through time as in the Dickens or the Twain—he *intends* it. And he has a theory: "'Clearly,' the Time Traveller proceeded, 'any real body must have extension in four directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness, and—Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time. There is, however, a tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three dimensions and the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives.'" Of course, Wells isn't quite as interested in the conceit of the time machine as he is in restaging the clash between the Victorian working and ruling classes or in showing us humanity's ultimate evanescence. But while readers today may be only mildly interested in his take on politics and the end of the world as we know it, they are still fascinated by Wells's idea of traveling through time.

If you want to see just how much Wells has influenced our culture, stop by **Andy's Anachronisms** <*http://www.timetravelreviews.com*>. I love both the ambition and simplicity of this personal site. There are no fancy graphics or streaming media here; Andy just writes—and writes perceptively. "This site has evolved out of my life long fascination with all things related to time and time travel. I hope that in sharing my collection of references and reviews that other like-minded souls will benefit from this site and that in turn you, the visitor may provide me with new references and insight." Although clearly a work in progress, this site is already the most complete listing of time travel fiction, film, television, and music on the web. He mentions about a hundred movies, thirty-odd TV series, maybe eighty short stories, and a clutch of novels. For all the fiction on his lists, he offers summaries and astute evaluations. Although he hasn't reviewed all the media on his lists (a mercy, actually), he is usually spot on when he does comment. This site is full of wonderful factoids like this: "Produced as a filler segment for Jay Ward's *Rocky and Bullwinkle* series beginning in 1959, *Peabody's Improbable History*, to the best of my knowledge, qualifies as the first time travel series produced for television." I must say, however, that I'm not at all sure I agree with his exegesis of the **Talking Heads** <*http://www.talking-heads.net*> classic tune **"Once in a Lifetime"** <*http://www.rollingstone.com/videos/playvideo.asp?sid=6722&cf=89*>.

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Part of our fascination with time travel has to do with the havoc it would seem to wreak with causality. The famous **grandfather paradox** <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandfather_paradox*> asks what would happen if a time traveler went into the past and killed his grandfather when Grandpa was just a boy? One of **Robert A. Heinlein**'s <*http://www.heinleinsociety.org*> most famous stories **"All You Zombies"** <*http://www.heinleinsociety.org/rah/works/shortstories/allyouzombies.htm*> might best be described as the grandfather paradox on steroids. If this story doesn't make your head spin, then you are reading the wrong magazine, my friend! Astronomer **James Schombert** has undertaken to diagram the main character's family tree **here** <*http://zebu.uoregon.edu/~js/glossary/grandfather_paradox.html*>. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s **Time Travel and Modern Physics** <*http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time-travel-phys*> is a learned and abstruse examination of the varieties of time travel paradoxes; much of it zinged over the head of this befuddled English major, alas. **Time Travel Paradoxes** <*http://www.friesian.com/paradox.htm*> offers a more accessible tour of possible solutions to causality violation, including the **The Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics** <*http://www.station1.net/DouglasJones/many.htm*>.

exit

Only about half the sites in the **Time Travel Webring** <*http://m.webring.com/hub?ring=timetrav*> are worth a click. There are a couple of **Back to the Future** <*http://www.bttfmovie.com*> homage sites and some personal sites that are only partially about time travel. And then there are the wackos! I must say that one of these took my breath away. **The Time Travel Fund™ Your Ticket To The Future** <*http://www.timetravelfund.com*> explains that although time travel may be possible, it is a long way off—no doubt *centuries* away. Next comes the pitch.

"Q: How does this help me?

A: The concept is that one day, it may be possible for people living far in the future to retrieve you from your current frame of reference (their past—your present) and bring you into the future (their present—your future.)

Q: Why would they want to?

A: That is the purpose of the fund. The simple answer is, we pay them to bring you into the future."

Yes folks, for a mere ten dollars you can invest in the Time Travel Fund and through the miracle of compound interest, your investment will be worth billions by the time your great^{50}grandchildren lasso that wormhole and invent time travel.

The custodians of the fund will then pay to have you snatched from the twenty-first century and carried off to live in 30,004.

Some may scoff, but hey, if you really want to visit the future someday, ten bucks is a heck of a lot cheaper than what it would cost to have your **head cryogenically frozen** <*http://www.cryonics.org/expert.html*>! ○

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OVERSITE

Maureen F. McHugh

Maureen F. McHugh teaches fiction part time at John Carroll University. She's written a couple of dozen short stories and four novels. Ms. McHugh lives in a small suburban town in northeastern Ohio, next to a dairy farm. In the summer, black-and-white cows graze on the other side of her fence.

"It doesn't hurt, Gram," Renata says. My sixteen-year-old daughter pulls up her T-shirt sleeve to show her bare arm, the skin summer brown and the muscle swelling slightly into smooth biceps, flawless. "I had it done when I was little and see, you can't even tell."

My mother is sitting in the little examining room at the assisted living complex. Everything is white and hospital-like but there's no examining couch. There's just a desk, a little white table with two chairs and a scale. The doctor, a woman I don't know, is sitting in the other chair. My mother is bewildered, her face turned up toward me. She's got Alzheimer's.

"It's okay, Mom," I say.

She wants to understand, I can see that. So I explain again. "It's an implant that will let them know where you are, and how you are. It won't hurt."

Her eyes water constantly, now. In the time it takes me to explain, she grasps and loses the words, grasps and loses phrases as they go past.

She looks at me and then at Renata, who is smiling, and finally submits uncomprehendingly. We have worn her down. The doctor bares my mother's arm, where the crepey flesh hangs loosely on the bones. The doctor swabs her upper arm with antiseptic and says, "I'm going to give you something to numb it, okay?" To me the doctor says in her normal voice, "It's just a little lidocaine." I don't like the doctor, but I don't know why. She is no-nonsense. She has professional hair, lightly streaked. This is no reason to dislike her.

My mother winces at the injection and is surprised again. She looks up at me, at Renata. We are smiling, both of us.

"Okay," my mother says. What is okay? I have no idea.

We wait for a few minutes.

My mother says, "Is it time to go?"

"Not yet," I say. "They're going to give you an injection."

"What?" my mother says.

"They're going to implant a chip. It will help them take care of you."

I try to say it every time as if it was the first time I said it. I don't want

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to embarrass her. Her head swings around, from Renata to me to the doctor and then back to Renata.

"It's okay, Gram," Renata says.

"Renata," my mother says.

The doctor has an injection gun and while my mother is focused on my daughter, she puts it firmly against my mother's arm and puts the chip in.

"Oh!" says my mother.

It's another low-grade moment of horror, but I think about that particular time with my mother because Renata was there and we were united, she and I. So that's a good memory. I come back to it a lot. In the background, shining, is Renata, who is young and healthy and good, raising her arm to show her grandmother that the chip is nothing, nothing at all.

The last two nights I have dreamed of dogs in trouble. I don't dream about Renata, although when the dreams wake me up, it's thinking about Renata that keeps me awake. The first night, I dreamed of seeing a stray dog and not stopping to pick it up although it was wandering in an empty parking lot near a busy road. That was the first night Renata didn't come home and it doesn't take Freud to figure out what that meant. Seventeen-year-olds sleep on friends' couches, I know. Or Renata might be sleeping in her car.

The second night, I dreamed that I was on a desert island and Sonia, our Golden Retriever, was with me. There was some horrible fate impending for Sonia and I had to kill her before something worse happened. I laid her down on some sticks. She trusts me, she's more my dog than anyone's, and she didn't like it, but for me she laid there. In my dream, I told her, "Stay, Sonia. Stay."

She stayed because I held her there by looking at her, the way you can sometimes will a dog into submission. She stayed while I lit the fire. And then the horror of it all hit me and I said, "Sonia, up!"

And I woke up.

That was last night, the second night Renata didn't come home.

Today is Tuesday and on Tuesdays I drive from work to the nursing home where my mother is. I go to see her Tuesday and Thursday and Saturday, and even though she doesn't know what day it is or what days I visit, I think maintaining the pattern is important.

It's a nice place. The hallways are carpeted, and there is none of the clatter and echo, the institutionalization I associate with nursing homes. It's more like a hotel near the freeway, the kind that includes breakfast in the lobby. My mom's room has her own furniture from her condo—her gold couch, her bed, her little dinette table, the white ceramic angel that sat on an end table. She got the angel in a Christmas gift swap with her bridge club, but she thinks it's something inherited, antique.

"Clara," she says when she sees me. "What are you doing here?"

For a moment, everything seems normal.

"Hi Mom," I say. "I came to see you."

She leans forward and whispers, "Take me home."

"Okay," I say. My mother wanders. She tries to get away. That's why

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they implanted the chip. It's called a Digital-Angel and it monitors her blood pressure and temperature and has a GPS so that at the reception desk they can track her. When she was living at her condo, the police found her in her nightgown and a pair of black high-heeled shoes, carrying an empty pocketbook, walking down Ashleigh Drive. It was five in the morning. When I picked her up at the police station, her bare ankles almost broke my heart.

"Where's Renata?" she asks. She thinks Renata is still eight.

"She's at home," I say.

My mother frowns. She has an inkling she's missing something. She doesn't really know anymore that she has Alzheimer's, but sometimes she knows something is wrong. That she is disappearing. Plaque filling up the interstitial spaces between her neurons, her brain like Swiss cheese filled with fibrous mold. "She's with the babysitter," she says.

"Renata is seventeen now," I say brightly, as if it were utterly normal that nine years had been absorbed into the fungus. And of course, Renata isn't home. I don't know where Renata is.

My mother purses her lips. She senses I'm lying. Sometimes she makes the connections, and sometimes she is fiercely there, fully firing. She looks at me, her pale eyes bright, her Einstein hair flaring around her head. She leans forward. My smile is fixed on my face.

"Take me home," she whispers.

We got a Digital Angel for Renata when she was nine. There had been a rash of abductions, another summer of disappearing girls. Matt and I knew that statistically she was in more danger in our car. But while I was getting ready for work in the morning, I got into the habit of switching on Court TV, and there was a trial going on of a man who had abducted a girl. He lived in a camper. He was fiftyish, balding, and had a handlebar moustache like some character actor in a realistic Western. I would get into the shower, and when I got out, I would dry off and come back into the bedroom, and absently pat Sonia the Golden Retriever lying on the foot of the bed hoping not to be thrown off. On the television, they would be talking about there being no body. About how hard that would make it to convict him. About the girl's palm print found on the wall above his bed. I would picture her, leaning her weight for a moment to steady herself.

So I told Matt I was going to do it, and he agreed. Matt is such a softy. I told him on the phone, and I heard him sigh softly, relieved. Relieved that *I* had made the decision that we both wanted but both knew was a little foolish. We agreed it was foolish, but it wasn't expensive, only about a hundred dollars, so why not?

I could track her on the computer on DigitalAngelMap.com. It's a street map, zoom in, zoom out, like the ones for driving directions, only Renata shows up on it as a yellow triangle. While I was at work, I could plug in her number and my password and see the yellow triangle that was Renata at 2216 Gary—the house of Kerry, her best friend. I left it up on my computer, running in the background, while I talked on the phone or did columns in spreadsheets. I'm a planner. I order parts for manufacture. Planning is an inexact science, a kind of art. If I have too many parts or-

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dered, then money is sitting around as inventory—costing us space. If I order the parts too slow, and we run out, then the assembly line shuts down, and that's even worse.

When I took Renata to the doctor's to get the chip implanted, she sat on the examining table, frightened, while the doctor swabbed her arm to give her the lidocaine. I held her there with my eyes, the way I could sometimes hold Sonia, the Golden Retriever.

Renata did not cry out. She only flinched.

There is no trace of Renata on DigitalAngelMap.com. We were arguing. I told her to be in by eleven and she said she'd try and I said trying wasn't good enough. It escalated from there. She told me, "You watch! You watch your computer! One minute I'll be there and the next I won't! You won't know where I am and that will kill you!"

The kids wrap metal tape around their arms to cut off the signal. I knew that. I didn't know she did it.

Matt says, "Should we call the police? Report her as missing? As a runaway?"

I say, "She'll be eighteen in five months. What would we do then?"

"Don't we want to send a message?" he asks. "Let her know we take this seriously?"

"I think she has to come back herself," I say.

"I think we should get the police," he says.

"But won't they arrest her? She could end up in some sort of juvenile detention place. Or have a record. What if Keith has something in the car?" We think they smoke pot. We've discussed it.

"I'm going to make some calls," he says. "I'm going to call Kerry, and then Keith's aunt."

"Okay," I say, although I don't expect anything. Kerry and Renata have been drifting apart—Kerry on track for college, Renata going . . . wherever it is that Renata is going.

Matt gets in the car and drives around. He calls me from the park to tell me she's not there.

Renata has a boyfriend, Keith. Keith is short and skinny and has three lines branded beneath his lower lip, radiating like the rays of a sun. We won't let Renata get branded, tattooed, or pierced. Keith shaved his head for awhile, but now he's letting his hair grow. Matt remarked one time, "Have you ever noticed how Keith always needs something?"

That was the evening Keith needed a jump for his car. Matt stood out on the driveway, dressed in his business casual (Matt is an engineer) and hooked up the jumper cables, talking amiably with Keith, while Renata sat on the front steps with her bare arms crossed over her knees and her chin on her forearms, staring at nothing. Renata had dyed her hair black a week before. She was wearing a pair of men's pants, suit pants, charcoal gray. As far as I could tell, she had stopped wearing underwear.

I don't think there's a day in my life when I haven't worn underwear.

When she dyed her hair black, she challenged me, "Are you going to tell me I can't dye my hair?"

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"No," I said. "You can dye your hair any color you want. You can shave it off if you want." I hoped that by telling her she could shave it off, she wouldn't. But Matt and I had decided she could do anything temporary—just nothing permanent—no tattoos, piercings, or brands.

It is a phase, adolescent rebellion, the process of separation. I want to blame Keith, of course. Renata got all "A's" and "B's" all the way through middle school. Now she's getting an "A" in art and "C's" and "D's" in everything else.

Renata is getting an "A" in art, despite the fact that she doesn't even bother to do some of the projects. Mr. Vennemeyer, her young art teacher, just shrugs his shoulders and says, "Of all the people I've taught, only Renata is a real artist." When she was fifteen, he started an Art Club where he taught her to stretch canvas, prime it, and choose colors for the ground. Other kids do sculpture and collage and work with the kiln. Renata paints. Every so often she gets interested in something he assigns, and does a 3-D maze or a collage, but mostly she paints.

She paints in our basement. I buy her oils and canvas and stretchers. Matt doesn't know how much I've spent on tubes of Windsor and Newton oils. "How can you paint in the basement?" I ask. "Don't you need more light?"

She shrugs. "I need space," she says. She and Keith are down there for hours, music playing quietly on her dad's old boom box. I've gone down often enough to make sure and I never have the sense that they are doing anything. No hurry, no dishevelment. Just Renata painting and Keith sitting in a ratty old armchair they found set out for the garbage.

Matt doesn't go down in the basement. His workbench and tools are in the garage. I go down for something now and then—boxes for Christmas gifts, or glasses stored down there. I shouldn't look at Renata's paintings. They're hers. There is something private about them. But I do.

"Come downstairs," I say to Matt on the second night Renata is gone.

He comes down with me and we stand with our arms around each other's waists while he looks at Renata's paintings.

Renata paints pictures of girls hit by cars. There are always four paintings: the moment when the girl is struck, the girl sliding across the hood or against the windshield, the girl in the air, and the girl crumpled on the ground. Renata has all sorts of photos stuck up on her easel and on the table she uses for her paints. She has pictures of her best friend Kerry. Keith has Kerry around the waist and yanks her backward forcefully—all you can see of Keith are his arms. Renata used Matt's digital camera. In her first series of girl hit by car, you can see it is based on Kerry.

There are also pictures of cars and car hoods; Matt's, mine, Keith's, cars I don't recognize.

In the first series, the Kerry series, the girl looks awkward, not quite right, except in the painting where she is flying through the air. I think Renata really caught something there.

In the second series, the girl is a black girl who looks around ten. There's a magazine photo of a black woman falling off a fire escape, and you can see that in the girl in the air. In that series, the best painting is the girl crumpled on the pavement. In the third series, the girl is an enor-

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mously fat white girl with red hair. She bobs in the flying-in-the-air painting like a huge pink Macy's Parade balloon. She has on a red jumper and white anklets and Mary Janes. She doesn't look frightened. And when she is lying crumpled on the pavement, her haunch is exposed so her white panties show. Her huge thigh is painted pink and smooth as strawberry yogurt.

The one Renata is working on right now is an Amish girl series. She works on them all at once, so they are sitting around in stages. On her easel is the Amish girl being hit by the car. The Amish girl is in gray, with a white bonnet sketched over her hair. She is wearing sneakers. The car is Keith's car.

"Well," Matt says slowly. "She'll have to come back for all this, won't she. She wouldn't leave all this."

I don't know.

There is a folder, open, full of pictures of girls cut out from magazines, and just visible, the scalloped corner of an old photograph. I reach for it, and Matt says, "Don't touch that," but I do anyway. It's from one of my photo albums. It's an old black and white picture of a young woman, maybe Renata's age, wearing a forties-style one-piece bathing suit. She's soft, and, by today's standards, a little heavy in the hips, and her bangs make her look something like Bettie Page. The bathing suit is a jazzy number with polka dots. She's sexy and solid as a pin-up. It's my mother. I show it to Matt and then take it upstairs with me. He doesn't say anything.

Brenda, one of the aides where my mother lives, left me a voicemail at work that my mother was out of some things—lipstick (Cool Watermelon by Revlon, a strange, overly vivid shade that my mother prefers) and lotion and menstrual pads, because sometimes my mother has a little urinary leakage. It's Wednesday and I'll see her Thursday, but I stop on my way home from work and pick things up at the grocery store and drop them off.

I always want to leave right away, so I always make myself sit down and say something to Mom. I touch her a lot, on the arm, on the shoulder. I kiss her cheek sometimes. We were not a huggy family. We're not as remote as the classic Presbyterian family (my husband says that in moments of great emotion, the men in his family would shake hands), but we don't touch each other much. My mother seems to like to be touched now, though.

Her phone rings. I can't think who would call. I call her and tell her I'm coming over, although I have no sign that she remembers. I used to see notes written to herself, CLARA COMING. But not anymore. I pick it up, expecting it to be a telemarketer. It's Matt.

"Renata called," he says. "She's on her way home."

"Is she all right?" I ask.

"She didn't say," he says.

"I'll be right there."

My mother is watching me, birdlike. "Where's Renata?" she asks.

Lost, I want to say. "I don't know where she is, Mom. She's run away. She's seventeen and she's run away. But she's on her way home now."

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My mother looks at me and reaches out and covers my hand with hers. Her hand is cool. She searches my face. I think she is together in this moment and I know what she is going to say. It's what she said to me when Renata was two and I told her that sometimes I was so afraid I would get up in the middle of the night to see if Renata was breathing. She said, "Our children are hostages to the world."

She pets my hand and then she says, "Take me home."

Our driveway is a bit of an incline. Keith parks at the bottom, the way he always does, and Matt and I stand at the door, watching. The car sits for a long moment, while Renata and Keith are apparently talking. Then the doors open and Renata gets out and comes up the driveway, head down, leaning forward against the slope. She's wearing plumber's tape around her upper arm. Keith gets out and leans up against the door of his car, arms crossed across his chest.

I gasp and Matt says, "Oh shit." Keith's lip is split and his face is bruised all down one side, swelling now so that one eye is half closed.

Renata doesn't look back at him, doesn't say anything to us, just goes in the house.

Matt goes down the driveway and I know what he is asking. Are you all right? he is asking. Do you want me to go with you to the emergency room? But Keith is shaking his head.

I follow Renata inside. "Have you had anything to eat?" I ask. I hear the door behind me, Matt coming in.

"We stopped at McDonald's," Renata says. She tried to be vegetarian for a week or two, but she's a carnivore. Even as a baby, Renata would choose steak over ice cream.

"So where did you go?" Matt asks her.

"Some guy Keith knows has a friend who has a trailer. He uses it for fishing or something. Out near Sandusky." I can imagine the trailer, low and mean and narrow. The story comes out in little bits, and before much of it has come out, Renata is crying. The guy who owns the trailer is named Don, and he showed up there today. He was high on something, Renata thinks maybe crack.

"He's missing a bunch of teeth," she says, "and I can't understand him when he talks." She is crying in the way that is almost like hiccoughing. "So I kept smiling and nodding my head like I knew what he was talking about but I was afraid I was nodding my head at the wrong times or something.

"And then he got mad at Keith, I don't know why. And he got all ugly and he, like, winged this ashtray at Keith and it hit him in the head and they started fighting and then Keith and I got out of the house and he said he was going to get his gun and we were out in the middle of nowhere and I was so scared and we ran to Keith's car. While we were trying to back out his crappy driveway he shot at us and he hit the back of Keith's car. There's a hole in the trunk. We kept backing up really fast, and his driveway is really long. It's just these two ruts, not even gravel or anything."

We are sitting on the couch and, at seventeen, she almost crawls into my lap. I stroke her hair, coarse with black dye.

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We ground her, of course.

"Here's the deal," I say. "I'll take you to the doctor and get the chip taken out. But you've got to do your part. You've got to tell us where you're going and what you're doing."

She is subdued and listens without agreeing or disagreeing.

Matt and I lecture, even if we know it is the worst thing to do. How can we not? All our feelings spill out in warnings. She's got to straighten up. She'll be eighteen in five months, and she's got to make some decisions. If we're going to help her go to art school, she's got to get her grades up. And on, and on.

Her dad goes to the bathroom and I take the photo of my mother out of my purse. I slide it toward her on the coffee table.

She frowns at it, and looks up at me, puzzled.

"You can have it," I say. "But please don't paint her being hit by a car. I couldn't stand it."

She covers her mouth with her hand, thinking. What words are trapped behind that hand?

Then she nods and says softly, "Okay, Mom."

At two that morning, I wake up, frightened from some dream. I lie in bed and catalogue my sins; obsessive, insufficiently understanding, self-absorbed. Then I get up and call up DigitalAngelMap.com. First I put in Renata's code, which I know by heart. The yellow triangle is steady on our street. I watch it a long time. Sonia climbs the steps. I can hear her. She's an old dog now and she has arthritis. She comes into the extra bedroom where we keep the computer and lies down and sighs.

I put in my mother's code. As soon as I start typing it, I am gripped by the deep conviction, the premonition that my mother is out wandering around.

But the triangle is right where it should be, unmoving. I turn off the computer and then step over the dog and turn out the light, step blindly back over the dog and sit in the chair. The dark and stillness spread around me, blanketing the house and the street. The cars are silent and still and the girls are all safe in their beds. ○

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THE THIRD PARTY

David Moles

David Moles has lived in six time zones on three continents and hopes some day to collect the whole set. In addition to *Asimov's,* his work has appeared in *Polyphony 2* and on *Strange Horizons.* The author currently resides in Seattle.

It was closer to dawn than midnight when Cicero pushed aside the bar's canvas half-curtain. He brought a gust of wind and rain in with him, the wind blood-warm, the rain with the green taste of a stagnant pond.

There were three stools in front of the plywood counter, and the middle one was occupied. Cicero chose the one on the left and sat down heavily.

"Where have you been?" demanded the man on the middle stool. The language he used had no more than fifty speakers in the world.

Cicero ignored him. The bartender set a wooden cup in front of him and poured in three fingers of cloudy spirit. While it settled, the old man dished out a bowl of soup and set it down next to the cup. Cicero dipped a hand into his algae-stained rain cape and pushed a handful of zinc coins across the bar.

The other man sighed.

Cicero reached past him for the bottle of hot sauce and poured a generous dollop into the soup bowl. "Faculty reception," he said. "Couldn't get away." He stirred the soup with his long spoon. "You had to pick the first night of storm season, didn't you? It's pissing down out there." He took a noisy slurp from the short spoon and followed it with a gulp from the cup.

"Damn it, Cicero—"

"I'm joking," Cicero said. He balanced a fishball on the long spoon and eyed it critically before popping it in his mouth. "I was followed," he said around the mouthful. "Took me a bit to lose them."

The other man tensed. "Dealers?"

"What?" Cicero swallowed and put down his spoon. "Of course it wasn't the dealers! Do you think they'd use people? They'd use, I don't know, drones or something."

"Right," the other man said, relaxing.

"Marius," Cicero said, "what's gotten into you? It was the Specials or it was the Secret Empire, and either way I left them behind before I was out of the District. Strictly local."

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Marius sighed and rapped on the bar to signal the bartender. Now it was Cicero's turn to wait impatiently while the bartender set down another bowl and refilled both cups.

Finally Cicero shrugged, and turned his attention back to his soup. "There *was* a reception," he volunteered, around another mouthful of fish. "At the Chancellor's. For the new Semard Professor of Inapplicable Optics. Had a nice chat with him about luminiferous ether."

"That's brilliant, Cicero. You're supposed to be teaching political economy, not physics."

"I'll teach what I damn well please," Cicero said mildly.

He was quiet for a moment, sipping his drink. After a little while he looked up. "Talking of dealers," he said. "They were at the University today. Two of them. Nosing around the library."

"What were they looking for?" Marius said.

"I don't know," said Cicero, "but I didn't like it. They weren't even in local clothes. I don't know who the librarians thought they were."

"Listen, Cicero," Marius said. "Galen's thinking about going home."

"And leaving Salomé to the dealers?" Cicero said. "Pull the other one."

"I'm serious," Marius said. "The consensus in Outreach is that it would be the safest thing."

Cicero put his drink down.

"Fuck the consensus," he said.

He waited for Marius to say something, and when the other man remained silent, said:

"What are you going to do?"

Marius sighed. "I don't know. Wait till they make a decision, I suppose."

Cicero looked down, toying with his cup. They were both silent for a little while.

"Marius," Cicero said eventually. "If we do go back—is there anyone you're going to regret leaving behind?"

"Plenty of people," said Marius. "The whole workers' movement, for a start." He looked at Cicero, and saw the expression on his face.

"Oh," he said. He shook his head. "No. Not like that."

Cicero sighed.

"You're in a tight spot, aren't you?" said Marius.

"I suppose I am," Cicero said.

He caught the first eastbound train back to the University District. It was nearly empty; the only passengers in Cicero's car were a couple of comatose, second-shift City clerks, slinking back to their families in the suburbs after drinking away the week's wage packet.

He felt very alone, all of a sudden. He was not supposed to be alone. Somewhere overhead were the two Community Outreach ships, *Equity* and *Solidarity*; there were analysts and computers, there was the QT network linking them to the Outreach offices at Urizen and Zoa, and through them to the rest of Outreach and to the Community at large. Some small but perceptible fraction of the Community undoubtedly was, right now, focusing its attention on this world, this continent, this city; perhaps even on Cicero himself.

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The train passed the dockside shantytowns and the skeletal, rust-streaked shapes of waterfront cranes, and came out onto the long high span of Old Republic Bridge. For a moment the clouds parted; on the left was the great sparkling gray-green bay, with the darker green of the inland sea beyond, and on the right was Basia, bright and dirty and beautiful, wrapped in tropical foliage from the wooden houses of the poor to the gilded, steel-framed spires of the City.

A million people in Basia. A hundred million more scattered over the surface of Salomé. Working. Sleeping. Praying. Stealing. Killing one another, with knives, and bullets, and poor sanitation, and bad fiscal policy. Making love.

"Fuck it," Cicero said aloud, making one of the sleeping clerks snort and look up.

He wondered how many of the researchers and experts and self-styled authorities really understood what they were doing. Very few, he suspected. It was all very well for them to talk about the weight of history, about emergent complexity and long-term consequences, about gradual change in due course—when they never had to face the people whose lives were being turned upside-down by their decisions, face them and look them in the eye.

It was all very well for them to suggest that Outreach abandon Salomé to the dealers.

To suggest that he abandon Thalia.

The train reached the end of the bridge and started the long climb up to the green-topped cliffs on the opposite side of the bay, and the rain closed in again.

Cicero took a quick, deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Fuck it," he repeated. "I'm staying."

He waited in the shadows of the barred gate of Palmer College as the University proctor made his way along the lane, pausing every few yards to rustle with his long staff among the stalks of climbing bamboo that overgrew the red walls of Graces, Palmer's ancient rival. The walls had stood against fire and riot and war in their time, but generations of peace had left them untested by anything more violent than the annual brawl with Palmer. And now that Graces was a women's college, there was not even that; any insults Palmer's undergraduates offered to the student body of Graces were on a purely individual basis.

When the proctor was out of sight, Cicero looked up and down the lane, tied back his hood and sleeves, and scrambled into the wet greenery. As generations of truant undergraduates had discovered—and the proctors knew full well—the bamboo was more than strong enough to support a climbing body, and its leaves more than deep enough to hide one.

Five years in Salomé's low gravity had done nothing for Cicero's muscle tone, but he made it to the top, and then along the tiled roofs to Labriola House, where he swung down into the open quad and onto the third-floor balcony. He unslung his satchel, paused for a moment to arrange his gown and brush the wet leaves from his hair, and knocked on the first door he came to.

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After a little while, a sleepy maid opened it.

"Good morning, Leah," said Cicero. "Is Miss Touray receiving visitors?"

The maid bobbed up and down. "She'll receive you, sure, I'm sure," she said. "She's been up all night at her books. It'd be an act of charity, sir, if you'd convince her at least to close her eyes for a few minutes before chapel."

"I shall see what I can do," Cicero said.

Graces' star student was, in fact, at her books. The table that Thalia Xanthè Touray-Laurion bent over was stacked with books, four and five high, and there was paper everywhere the books were not. As Cicero entered the room she kicked her chair back and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

"Cicero!" she said. "What time is it?"

"Thursday," he said, kissing her. "The sixty-eighth of summer, though storm season seems to have come early this year." He opened his satchel and took out a small paper-wrapped package. "These are for you," he said, setting it down on the table. "The fruit filling, I'm afraid; with the dockworkers on strike there's no chocolate to be had."

She gave him a look, and he amended his answer.

"Six o'clock," he said.

"Six o'clock!" she said, looking back at her books and papers. "I need a window." She stood, and stretched. "Oh, Cicero!" she said, turning suddenly. "Did you know that the real numbers can't be counted?"

Cicero's brow furrowed. "I don't know," he said. "Did I?" He found the coffee press and upended it over the wastebasket to empty the filter. "Is that what you've been working on all night?"

"Yes!" Thalia said. "It's true! And I can prove it!"

Cicero filled the press from Thalia's bedside pitcher and set it on the burner. "What about that statistics thing for Bolte?" he said, trying to light the gas.

"Oh, that," Thalia said. She fished around among the books and papers and came up with a canary-yellow essay booklet. "Done. Yesterday afternoon." She picked up a pastry. "God, I'm starving."

The gas caught. Cicero turned from the burner and picked up the booklet. *Explicit quantification of subjectivity effects on prior distributions: an alternative to maximum likelihood estimation*. Thalia's handwriting was spare and direct, betraying an abundance of calligraphy lessons but also a distinct lack of patience.

"It's very good," he said as he turned the pages. "It's too advanced for Bolte, though."

And not just for Bolte, he thought. He'd had something like it back on Ahania, in History of Mathematics, or it would have been too advanced for him as well. He flipped through to the conclusion.

"Of course the real numbers aren't countable," he said absently, as he read, though Thalia's overnight project had nothing to do with the essay. "For any countable sequence of them, you can construct a series of nested intervals converging to a number that's not in the sequence."

He turned a few more pages, and looked up to see Thalia staring at him.

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"Cicero," she said. "I spent all night proving that. I don't think anyone else ever has. You're an *economics* professor. Where did that come from?"

Cicero shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I must have read it somewhere. Eat your pastry; it'll go stale." He took one for himself.

"I mean it, Cicero," Thalia said. "You're very bright, and I love you dearly, but you're not a genius."

"It's all right," he said. "You are." He kissed her again. "Did you know that the new Semard Professor says that the speed of light in a vacuum is constant, regardless of the relative velocity of the source and the observer?"

"Yes," she said. "I read his paper. I meant to write him about it; distance and time would have to vary with the observer's motion for it to work. Stop trying to distract me."

Cicero sighed. It wasn't Thalia that he was trying to distract; it was himself.

He stood back, looking around the room for a place to sit, and finally settled on the edge of the bed. The mattress was the martially virtuous kind the upper classes of Travalle and Thyatira favored, no more than a little thin cotton stuffing over hard wood, but at that moment it seemed infinitely inviting.

All he wanted to do was take Thalia's hand and pull her down onto it with him, to curl around her with the blankets drawn over their heads, to sleep there forever like enchanted lovers in some fairy tale, caring nothing for professors and colleges, revolutionaries and merchant adventurers. Nothing for orbiting starships overhead, invisible and threatening.

"Thalia," he said instead. "If I had to go away—would you come with me?"

She looked at him. "Go away where?" she said. "The islands? Port-St.-Paul?"

Port-St.-Paul was the capital of one of Travalle's island colonies; it was supposed to be Cicero's home. Six thousand kilometers of stormy ocean separated the islands from Basia: enough to make it nearly impossible for the University to check his forged credentials, enough to paper over any number of cracks in his cover story.

He'd spent the three subjective years of the voyage from Zoa in a constant mild fever, as specialized medical nano rebuilt him into a Roka islander from the DNA up, blood type and skin color and the shape of his cheekbones and the texture of his hair. The face he saw in the mirror was still mostly his own, and by now he had grown accustomed to the differences—the flatter nose, the hair in ringlets rather than curls, the skin no longer blue-black but a richer, more complex brown that could show a blanch or a blush; all so that to the Travallese, he would appear not alien, but merely exotic. It was still enough to make Cicero an object of curiosity, and occasionally, of abuse, but he rarely minded that.

No, what he minded was what it made of his affair with Thalia. Not just a scandal but, in some circles, a lynching offense.

He shook his head. "Never mind," he said.

His resolve had wavered for a moment. But his choice was already made, a long time ago. If he ever made it back to the world where he'd been born, it would still not be the home he had left. His family, his child-

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hood friends—apart from a few who had made similar voyages—all of them had lived and died while he was traveling between the stars, and there was little chance he would ever see those few that had made the voyages again. That was the choice he had made; for Thalia and her people, though he hadn't known them yet. He couldn't ask her to make the same choice for him.

Thalia came and sat down at his side. "I'll take you back to Thyatira," she said, "as soon as I graduate. We'll get my father to endow chairs for both of us at Scetis Imperial."

Cicero smiled. "What will your mother say?"

"She'll be livid," Thalia said. "But that's nothing new. My father will love you."

He did take her hand then, and drew her to him.

"We'll change the world," she murmured. "You'll see."

When Thalia had gone off to chapel, Cicero left Graces College the way he had come in. He attended chapel himself, at Palmer. He held office hours, and was either too lenient with the students who came to him, or too severe, or both. He wrote a scathing letter to the editor of the leading City financial newspaper, and a more conciliatory one to Thyatira's leading economic journal.

He even went to the main library and lurked for a while in the Round Reading Room, listening to the rain on the leaded roof, the clanking of the clockwork elevators and the pneumatic hiss of the order tubes. He had some vague idea of confronting the dealers, but either their business with the University was done or they were occupied elsewhere, because they never showed.

Cicero left frustrated but also, on some level, relieved; he had no idea what he would have said to them. He went back to his rooms, then, and sat for a while, watching the rainwater well up in the crevices between the ill-fitting windowpanes.

What am I going to do? he thought.

Cicero's ship, *Equity,* had been the second to reach Salomé from the Community. *Solidarity* had arrived first to lay the groundwork for the mission, gathering and recording and transmitting data back by QT so that Outreach could plan how best to bring the lost colony back into human civilization. *Equity,* trailing the other ship by twenty years, brought the real missionaries: specialists like Cicero, trained to move among the people of Salomé like fish in water.

Equity had been in the Jokanaan system less than two years when the mission's telescopes first spotted the dealers' ship, half a light year away, decelerating out of the unknown beyond. From Golden Age records and vague radio whispers, the Community knew that humanity had once spread much farther than the space they had explored; like any Outreach mission, the mission to Salomé had known there was a chance they would meet a counterpart coming the other way. They hadn't expected it, though. And if they had, they would have expected to meet a civilization not unlike the Community itself.

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The truth took some time to dawn on them. While Cicero was immersing himself in his adopted culture, paying the inbound ship no more mind than if it had turned up on the other side of the Community, Outreach linguists were trading dead languages with the newcomers, trying to make sense of paradoxical phrases like *intellectual property* and *exploitation rights*. The newcomers' ship had the nonsensical name *Elastic Demand*; the organization it represented apparently was called something like *Marginal, Limited*. For their civilization as a whole the newcomers used the word *association,* which sounded like *community* but had troubling differences in nuance.

Even when the newcomers' quaint obsession with commerce had earned them the nickname *dealers,* and some of Cicero's counterparts back in the Community—experts in development economics—had begun to voice concerns, neither the Outreach offices nor the Salomé mission took those concerns very seriously. It simply did not seem possible for the principles that applied to orphaned, poverty-stricken planets like Salomé, with their joint-stock companies and steam-powered colonial empires, to apply to an interstellar civilization.

And then Marginal's sales force landed in Basia, the capital of the largest of those empires, and announced its presence to the Travallese state.

And Outreach—and the Salomé mission, in particular—suddenly had to take those concerns seriously after all.

Cicero had been taking it for granted that, having come to save the people of Salomé from themselves, Outreach would as a matter of course save them from the dealers as well. Abandoning an entire planet, to be swallowed up by a civilization so dysfunctional that it carried the idea of property across interstellar space, was not to be thought of.

It had never occurred to Cicero that Outreach might decide that the problem was just too big to handle.

And if it's too big for Outreach to handle, he thought, where does that leave *me?* What can I do, alone?

He picked up Thalia's essay booklet and leafed slowly through the pages, not so much reading as simply tracing the shapes of the words.

With the Outreach mission gone, Thalia and the rest of Salomé's people would be helpless. Cicero had to do something; there was no one else.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. It came again; and then, as he stood, he heard the rattle of keys.

He went to answer it, and found the college porter with his master key already out. Old Professor Alier was with him, the Rector of Palmer himself. Next to Alier was a stocky, middle-aged man in a round hat and a black raincoat that was at least ten years out of style, followed by two uniformed City policemen.

"Professor Alier," Cicero said pleasantly, as the rector and the man in the round hat came inside. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"This is a damned unpleasant business, Cicero," Alier said. "The College has placed a great deal of trust in you, and you've chosen a fine way of repaying it." He turned to the man in the round hat. "You will keep the name of the College out of it, won't you?" he said.

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Cicero's mind raced. It couldn't be that the College had discovered his affair with Thalia; that would be a matter for University discipline—or, at worst, the masked "knights" of the Secret Empire—not the official police. And while his teachings were certainly subversive, he doubted that even his enemies on the economics faculty would take them so seriously as to have him arrested. Marius' work, of course, was quite openly subversive, and if the authorities had somehow been aware of Cicero's connection to it, they would most certainly want to talk to him. But he didn't think that was possible.

No, the dealers were making their move, and using the Travallese state to do it; that was the only plausible explanation.

Cicero was rarely in contact with *Equity* and *Solidarity* and the rest of the Outreach mission. For emergencies, he had a simple voice phone, implanted behind his right ear. Hopefully it still worked; he hadn't used it since training.

He worked his jaw to activate the phone. There was an answering buzz along his jaw.

—Trouble, he subvocalized.

The man in the round hat had a lower-middle-class, City accent. "We'll do our best, sir," he was saying to Alier. In a reassuring tone, he added: "I don't mind telling *you* that in most of these cases, we avoid the inconvenience of a trial."

"Trial?" Cicero said. "What the Devil are you talking about?" He turned to the Rector. "Professor, who are these people?"

"Don't pretend to be thick, Cicero," Alier said. "This gentleman here, Mr.—?" He looked at the man, and, when no name was forthcoming, cleared his throat and started over. "This gentleman here is with the Special Police. They seem to think you can help them with their inquiries."

"Actually," the Special told Cicero cheerfully, "we think you're guilty of espionage, sedition, subversion . . ." He leaned close, and his tone became confiding. ". . . and several other charges that we expect to enumerate before the day is out."

A murmur in Cicero's ear distracted him.

—Is it the dealers?

He'd expected one of the communications people, but it was Livia, *Equity*'s captain and the Outreach mission's nominal second in command.

—Must be, he told her.—All local so far, though, he added. He tried to cover it with a cough.

—Look, Livia said.—We've got our own troubles up here.

"There must be some mistake," Cicero said aloud.

To Livia, he added:—I'm about to be arrested.

—String them along, Livia said.—When we know where you're being taken, we'll find a way to get you out.

Right, Cicero thought. String them along. How am I supposed to do *that?*

The Special shook his head. "I'm afraid we don't make mistakes of that sort, sir," he said. He nodded to one of the uniformed policemen, who produced a pair of manacles, and turned back to Cicero. "I'll just take that, if you don't mind," he said.

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Cicero looked down and saw that he was still holding *Explicit quantification.*

"*I* mind," came a voice from the balcony. Cicero looked and saw Thalia coming up the stairs, and his heart sank.

She came up and addressed herself to Alier. "That's my essay for Professor Bolte, sir. I asked Dr. Cicero to give me some advice on a few points."

The Rector blinked. "Miss—Touray, is it?" he said. Cicero watched the conflicting emotions that passed over Alier's face: irritation, embarrassment, and an evident fear of upsetting one of the University's richest and most well-connected students. Alier turned to the man from the Special Police. "Surely there's no need for Miss Touray's essay to be taken in evidence," he said.

"Here," Cicero said, handing Thalia the essay. Their eyes met, and as their fingers touched briefly, Cicero's composure faltered.

His fingers tingling from the moment of contact, he slowly released the booklet. Cleared his throat, he said: "I'm sure this—" with a nod toward the policemen "—will all be cleared up shortly. I'll see you Friday at the usual time."

"Right," the Rector said. "Run along now, child."

Thalia nodded, and, with a backward glance at Cicero, turned to go.

"Just a moment, please—Miss Touray," the Special said, reaching out to bar the way. "That wouldn't happen to be—" he fished a piece of paper from his pocket and glanced at it "—Miss Thalia *Xanthè* Touray, Touray-Laurion, would it?" His pronunciation of the Thyatiran names was much better than Cicero would have expected.

Thalia nodded wordlessly.

The Special smiled. "Well, that's a bit of luck," he said. "Two birds with one stone, as you might say." He handed the Rector the piece of paper, and said to Thalia: "I've a warrant for your arrest as well, you see."

Fuck, Cicero thought.

And he turned to the policeman with the manacles, and with the heel of his right palm hit the bridge of the man's nose so hard that his neck snapped.

The other policeman swore and rushed in, knocking the Rector aside. Cicero kicked him in the stomach and sent him reeling back into the porter's arms.

"Run—" he started to say, turning toward Thalia.

And something hit him very hard in the back of the head.

Thalia watched Cicero crumple to the ground. She'd hardly seen the man in the round hat move. He stood over Cicero and exhaled slowly through pursed lips.

"That was a close one," he said, to no one in particular. He rubbed his knuckles.

The surviving policeman was throwing up in the doorway.

"Constable," the man said sharply. "If you're sufficiently well rested, you'll oblige me by taking the young lady into custody." He turned to the Rector, who was still pressed up against the wall, eyes wide with shock.

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"A cup of tea's what you'll be wanting, sir," he said. "Sorts you out a treat. We've things well in hand here."

"Yes," Alier said, rather unsteadily. "Yes, I'll just—" He trailed off, looking from Cicero's still-breathing body to the dead policeman and back again.

As the other policeman picked up the fallen manacles and went to put them around Thalia's wrists, the man in the round hat took Alier's arm and propelled him gently toward the doorway.

"On second thought, perhaps a small whisky," he said. Nodding to the porter, he added: "See that he gets one."

"Right you are, sir," the porter said.

The man watched them go down the stairs. When the sound of their footsteps had died away, he turned and knelt down between the bodies, feeling behind Cicero's left ear as if looking for a pulse. He seemed not to find it, and turned Cicero's head to check the other ear; but then, as Thalia watched in growing horror, he reached inside his coat and drew out a small penknife.

"What are you *doing?*" she said, as the man slipped the narrow blade under the skin, and the dark blood welled up. She struggled in the policeman's grip, and the man in the round hat looked up, fixing her with a cold glare.

"Quiet, now, miss," he said. "Right now you're a material witness. You don't want to become a suspect." He went back to what he was doing, fishing around in what was becoming a small pool of red, and came up with a teardrop of gold, no larger than the nail of Thalia's little finger. "There we go," he said. He tugged a handkerchief from Cicero's pocket and used it to clean the knife, which he folded and put away. Then he pressed the handkerchief against the wound. "That ought to do it."

He stood, holding the golden drop up to the light.

"What—" Thalia began.

"Hush," the man said, holding up a hand.

Thalia became aware of a tiny buzzing noise, like a faint and distant wireless voice caught by chance in between stations. It sounded angry—and worried.

"There's some as would give a king's ransom to have this under their microscopes," the man told Thalia. He let the thing fall to the tiles. "But the price of letting some others listen in would be much higher than that."

And he crushed the golden teardrop under his heel.

"Assault on an officer, resisting arrest, and willful murder," the Special announced as he came into the room. "I knew we'd find some way to lengthen your charge sheet, professor, but I didn't expect you to help us do it."

"I'm not a professor," Cicero said. There was a maddening trickle of blood beneath the bandage over his right ear.

Murder. He felt it again, the crack of bone, traveling up his arm with the shock of impact. Willful murder.

They were in the old wing of the Alicata Prison, he thought: stone walls and floor, and a steel door with a window of thick safety glass, so the guard outside could see and assist if Cicero became violent. There was lit-

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tle danger of that. Thick chains ran from his wrists through eye-bolts in the floor to his ankles, crossing under the heavy wooden chair on which he sat; he could shift a little in his seat, but that was all.

"Well, I can't very well call you *spy,* can I?" the Special said. He was standing; at the moment, he was looking out the tiny window into the hall. "And I very much doubt that Alexander Cicero is your real name."

"I'm not a spy, either," Cicero said. "I'm an assistant lecturer in economics."

The Special turned to face him. "What you are, professor, is something we have yet to determine." He leaned forward and put his fists on the table. "Don't try to convince us you're innocent. You gave up any pretense of that when you killed a constable."

"Shoot me for that, then," Cicero said. "Why should I give you anything else?"

The Special smiled and stood up. "Oh, we won't shoot you. You're far too valuable for that. No, I expect we'll keep you alive." He walked around behind Cicero and leaned forward. "Possibly for weeks," he said softly, into Cicero's good ear. "Some of our specialists are quite good at that."

Cicero twisted around until he could just see the Special out of the corner of his eye.

"Why don't you just tell me what you want?" he said.

"What I want?" the Special asked. He came around to the other side of the table and leaned over it to look Cicero in the eye. "What I *want,* professor, since you're kind enough to ask, is for you, and the rest of your kind, to go back where you came from."

"You mean Port-St.-Paul?" Cicero said. "Because—"

He never saw the blow coming. It struck him just below his wounded ear and snapped his head sideways. The pain was blinding, but, through it, he heard the Special's voice, leaning close:

"See here, professor. I've worn a mask before now. I've ridden with the Secret Empire. I've seen an islander hanged just for complimenting a fishmonger's wife on her dress, and I've held the rope that did it." He grasped Cicero's hair and pulled his head back, and his face, twisted with anger, swam into focus. "But I'd let that leering sodomitical beach-monkey have my *own* dear daughter before I'd let *your* lot have my country." He let go. "At least the islander was human."

The blow had made Cicero bite his tongue. He turned his head to the side and spit blood.

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"I'm as human as you are," he said, and instantly regretted it.

The Special gave a short, humorless laugh. "The imitation's clever; I'll give you people that." He pulled out the other chair and sat down, studying Cicero's face. "I see that the accusation doesn't surprise you," he said with a thin smile.

Cicero closed his eyes. Yes, that had been stupid; it would have been better to keep quiet.

Still, he thought, better the state than the dealers. No way out now but forward. He took a deep breath and expelled it.

Opening his eyes, he said:

"We're human. And we're here to help."

The Special snorted. "Are you, now?" he said. "And your friends?" He took out a file folder and opened it. "'Philip Marius,'" he read. "'Profession, machinist. Charges, unlawful assembly, industrial combination, and sabotage.'" He turned the page. "'David Solon. Profession, journalist. Charges, treason, subversion, incitement and libel. Jeanne Megaera, nurse: espionage, licentious behavior, *vitriolage,* solicitation, and attempted murder. Cyrus Mus . . .'"

The Special read another half-dozen names. It sounded like the state had a complete catalog of the Outreach missionaries in Travalle and its colonies. Cicero supposed the dealers had given it to them. He hoped at least some of the others had managed to evade capture.

"And then there's you, professor," the Special concluded. "I don't pretend to understand what, exactly, the Council of Economic Advisors thinks you're guilty of. But since you've signed your own death warrant two or three times already this afternoon, I think the question is—pardon the expression—academic."

He closed the folder. "It's an interesting idea of *help* you people have, professor," he said.

"I didn't say we were here to help *you,*" Cicero said.

The Special gave him an appraising look. "Point taken," he said. "Who, then? The islanders? The criminal classes?"

"Your grandchildren," Cicero said. "And your grandchildren's grandchildren."

The Special snorted. "Out of the goodness of your hearts, I suppose."

"Call it that if you like," Cicero said.

"How noble of you," the Special said. "My grandchildren didn't ask for your help, professor. And they don't need it."

"It's our help or the dealers'," Cicero said.

"'Dealers'?"

"Marginal," said Cicero. "You know who I mean."

"Oh, yes," the Special said. "The illustrious Marginal Limited Liability Corporation. Your competition. Now that they've arrived, you're offering to play fair with us, is that it?"

Cicero opened his mouth to speak, but the Special cut him off. In the accent of the dockside slums, he said:

"'Give me one last chance, sir, I swear I'll reform.'" He shook his head. In his own accent, he said: "How often do you think a copper hears that, professor? A good try, but much too late." He stood up and knocked on the

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glass. The guard outside peered in and then opened the door. "My coat," the Special said. "And my hat."

"Yes, sir."

As the guard fetched the Special's things, Cicero raised his voice. "Do you think *Marginal* will play fair?" he said. "They'll eat you alive!"

The Special took his coat and hat from the guard. Draping the coat over his arm, he turned to Cicero and said:

"Odd, professor; that's just what they said about *you!*"

The door closed, and Cicero slumped down in his chair. His mouth was full of the taste of blood, and the taste of failure, too.

At least it's not Thalia sitting here, he thought. They wouldn't treat her like this. She'll be safely on her way home by now.

"I am a citizen of Thyatira," she said, before the man even had time to sit down. "I demand to speak to the High Commissioner."

The Special reached out casually and slapped her across the face. Thalia froze, too shocked even to raise her hand to her cheek.

The man took off his hat. "None of that, now, miss," he said, his voice mild. "We know very well who you are; we even know that you're the High Commissioner's cousin. He'll hear about this in due course." The man leaned forward. "The question, miss, is: what *else* will he hear about?"

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to speak. When she said nothing, he smiled faintly, and sat down. He took out a folder and was quiet for a moment, leafing through it.

"Will he hear—for instance—that you're an islander's whore?" he suggested, looking up at her.

Thalia kept her face impassive. They couldn't blackmail her by threatening to tell her family. Cousin Milos already knew, from Embassy Intelligence. It was Thalia's mother who was going to be the problem, and for *that* confrontation, she had long been prepared.

The Special seemed to see that his shot had gone wide. "Well," he said. "I suppose that would be a manageable scandal. A few tongues will wag . . . probably set the cause of women's education back twenty years, if it gets in the papers. . . ." He shook his head sadly. "Oh, and your professor-boy will hang for it, of course. But one aristo's daughter having a little what-you-fancy behind closed doors, that's hardly the end of the world, is it?"

Thalia didn't answer.

"But what if it *was* the end of the world?" the Special said. He waited, studying her with unblinking eyes.

"What do you mean?" she eventually said.

The Special smiled. "I'm a reading man, miss," he said, "though I expect I don't look it, not to the likes of you. Magazines, mostly. Penny dreadfuls. A bit beneath you, I dare say. But they tell me you're interested in science, so perhaps you know the sort of thing I'm talking about. *Airship Stories. Wireless Stories. Astonishing.*"

Thalia had been reading *Airship Stories* since she was eleven years old. One of the chauffeurs had used to buy it in town, and sneak Thalia his copies when he was done with them.

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"They ran a serial in *Astonishing* last year," the Special continued. "I don't know if you read it. 'Mask People of Naaman,' it was called."

"Shape-changing monsters from other planets," Thalia said. "Sensationalist trash."

The Special gave her half a smile. "Where's your professor-boy from?" he said.

Thalia looked at him. "You don't need me to tell you that," she said.

"Oh, I know where he *says* he's from, miss," the Special said. He referred to the folder and read out: "'Port-St.-Paul, East Chatrang, Roka Archipelago.' I was hoping he might have been more honest with you."

She couldn't help laughing. "If you're expecting to tell you he's a Naamanite 'Mask Person,' you're more stupid than you look!"

"I'm not so smart as you, miss," the Special said, "but I'm not stupid, either. I know he's not from Naaman." He smiled. "He's from somewhere much farther away than *that*."

Thalia started to laugh again, and stopped, seeing the Special's face. His expression of faint amusement hadn't changed.

"You're serious!" she said.

The Special opened up the folder. He took out a grainy photograph, pushing it across the table for Thalia to examine.

"I expect you recognize Dr. Rosmer and Senator Oradour-Monatte," the Special said. "But these two; have you seen either of them before?"

The photograph showed the steps outside the Round Reading Room of the University Library. There were four men on the steps: one she recognized as a senior librarian, another as a Travallese politician. But the other two—

Their features were odd, foreign. They were short and stocky, more so even than Cicero. Both of them had strangely pale hair; the color was impossible to tell from the photograph, but Thalia didn't think it was the gray of old age. One of them, Thalia realized after a moment, was a woman; she hadn't seen it before because the two were dressed almost identically, in dark, close-fitting trousers and coats buttoned to the throat, cut like nothing she had ever seen before. Neither wore a hat, and the woman's hair was even shorter than the man's.

Thalia shook her head mutely.

"No?" the Special said. "That's reassuring. The one on the left—" he leaned forward, and tapped the picture "—calls himself Allen Macleane. The woman's called Bernadette Parker." He pronounced the foreign syllables carefully.

"And who are they?" Thalia said.

The Special sat back. "It's not who they are, miss, it's how far they've come. Since their last port of call—twenty light-years."

Thalia's bewilderment must have been plain.

"A light-year is—" the Special started to say.

"I know what a light-year is," Thalia said. "That's absolutely mad."

The Special shrugged. "I don't claim to know how they did it, miss," he said. "But they're here."

"Why?" Thalia said. "What do they want?"

"That's also a matter of some debate," the Special said. "They say they

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want trade. Not in gold or cloth or salt fish, which as I'm sure you've worked out wouldn't be worth the cost of shipping. In *knowledge*. Art, music, scholarship, literature."

"That still wouldn't be worth the cost of shipping," Thalia said.

"Right again, miss," said the Special. "What Mr. Macleane and Miss Parker and their friends—they call themselves 'Marginal,' Marginal Limited Liability Corporation—propose to do, is to set up a sort of interstellar semaphore or radiotelephone, connecting Salomé with—with the stars, I suppose, or at any rate the ones they know." He smiled. "We send them scratchy recordings of the Reunion Philharmonic and they send us the plans to build space-ships of our own."

"That hardly sounds like fair trade," Thalia said.

The Special tapped the side of his nose. "Do you know how the Archipelago Company makes its money, miss?" he asked. "Used to be, they'd buy wool and pig iron and timber in the islands and sell it here, in Basia; buy woven cloth and steel tools and whatnot here and sell them in the islands. They still do a bit of that, of course. But about fifty years ago some enterprising Company factor realized it would be cheaper to build mills and factories right there in the islands. Now most of what the Company sells in the islands is made in the islands, in Company mills and Company factories, out of wool from Company herds and iron from Company mines, and what they mostly ship back to Basia is money."

"It's not just plans for space-ships they're proposing to sell us, then," Thalia said. "We wouldn't know what to do with them, any more than an Eastern Desert tribesman would know what to do with the plans for a steam locomotive. It's science, and engineering, and everything we'd need to understand those plans. They could teach us so much. . . ."

"For a price, miss," the Special said. He seemed to think Thalia had missed his point. "For whatever the market will bear."

"I know," Thalia said. "I *have* studied economics, don't forget."

"Not for a moment, miss," said the Special. "But you see where this leads. As the only source of all that knowledge, there's no limit to the price they could set on it. Within a century these people might own half the world, the way the Company owns half the Archipelago."

"Within a century *these* people will probably have sold off their stakes and retired," Thalia said, "but I take your point."

Then she shook her head.

"This is mad," she said. "Even if it's all true, you can't possibly think Dr. Cicero is one of them."

It would explain so much—Cicero's hard-to-place foreignness, his indifference to convention, the way he combined an understanding of the most esoteric things with an ignorance of the most trivial ones. But while it was no trouble for Thalia to imagine Cicero as an alien, the idea of Cicero as an avaricious colonial speculator was laughable.

The Special stood up. He was silent for a moment, pacing, looking out into the corridor.

"The Marginal expedition arrived about three years ago," he began. "They came straight to the Senate and announced themselves; explained where they came from and what they proposed to do for us. The Senate

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wanted proof, naturally. They showed us plenty of gadgets and trinkets, but the Senate—Senator Oradour-Monatte, actually, the man you see in the picture—wanted more; some taste of all this knowledge they were proposing to sell us. 'Tell me something,' he said. 'Something I don't know.' And do you know what they told him?"

The Special stopped his pacing and turned to face her.

"They told him, miss, that there was another expedition, already here. A different lot of space-people, from some other—some other constellation, I suppose—altogether."

Thalia stared at him for a moment, then nodded, slowly. "You think Cicero's one of *them,*" she said.

"Miss," the Special said, "I'm quite sure of it. That thing I cut out of his ear proves he's not from this world, but even without it, I have plenty of evidence." He pulled out the other chair again and sat down. "Don't waste my time pretending you don't believe me," he said.

Thalia shook her head. Cicero was going to tell me, she thought. He almost did, this morning, when he talked about leaving. He must have thought I wouldn't believe him.

Would I have believed him?

"So what do *they* want?" she said.

In answer, the Special took out another photograph. She couldn't tell where or when it had been taken. It showed Cicero, in the clothes of a common dockworker, in conversation with another man, similarly dressed. He might have been Cicero's brother, though his features were heavier and his hair was not so straight; at any rate, he was from the same part of the world—whatever that world was.

"Have you seen this man before?" the Special said.

"Never," said Thalia.

"He goes by the name of Philip Marius," the Special said. "Nasty piece of work. He's a saboteur and an anarchist, among other things. It's the talkers in the workers' movement, men like Maspero and Coser, that get their names in the newspapers, but it's our boy Marius who gets things done. Sure you haven't seen him?"

"I'm sure," Thalia said.

The Special sighed. "Well, miss," he said, "the gentlemen from Marginal *may* be bent on enslaving us all, in the end, but they're men of business. By the standards of men of business, they've been quite amicable—negotiating directly with the Senate, providing the state with the odd bit of helpful information now and then." He tapped the photograph of Cicero and the anarchist, Marius. "But your professor's lot—they've been much less polite. Ten years and more they've been watching us, without so much as an introduction; five years they've walked among us in secret, stirring up civil unrest, corrupting our poor and our young folk. Infiltrating factories, hospitals, churches . . . and universities."

"Teaching political economy to the children of the upper classes hardly qualifies as *corrupting young folk,*" Thalia said. "If it does, the entire University faculty is guilty."

The Special smiled knowingly. "We can leave the professor's private

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life—and yours—alone for now," he said. "What's been keeping me awake nights—and what I wanted to know from you—isn't that; it's the thought that your professor, and his friend Marius, and the rest of their friends, might have been working *with* Mr. Macleane and his lot. Playing both ends against the middle, you see—against us."

"And have they?" Thalia said.

"I wish I knew, miss." The Special shook his head. "But I don't think so. I find your witness to Dr. Cicero's character oddly persuasive. He may be a liar, a murderer"—he drew the word slowly out, and Thalia flinched—"an anarchist sympathizer and an alien spy, but he's not a capitalist. And besides—"

A tentative knock came at the door.

"Come in," the Special said sharply.

A uniformed prison guard entered.

"The van's ready, sir," he said.

"Right," said the Special. "I'll be along in just a moment."

"Yes, sir." The door closed.

The Special gathered up the photographs and put them back in the folder. He put the folder back in his bag and stood up.

"'And besides'?" Thalia prompted.

"What?" the Special said.

"Besides what?" Thalia said. "What's the other reason you don't think Cicero's friends and this Marginal Corporation are working together?"

"Ah, that." The Special knocked on the door, and the guard opened it. "Well, miss, between arresting your young man and a few of his friends, arranging a little riot outside Marginal's offices in the City, and a few other pieces of misdirection. . . . Assuming they're not just staging it for our benefit, it looks as though we've had the two sides shooting at each other for the past hour and a half."

He tipped his hat to Thalia.

"Ta, miss," he said, and she heard the click of the lock behind him.

The guards maneuvered Cicero—with some difficulty, because of the manacles and leg irons—through the narrow corridors, and down several flights of stairs. He tried to count the number of flights, and to remember how tall the Alicata Prison was, how many stories, but he couldn't keep the figures in his head. He kept seeing the gables of Trilisser House, counting the steps of the spiral staircase up to his rooms. His ear was bleeding again, but with his hands bound there was no way for him to do anything about it.

They came out into a covered carriageway, so long and dark that it seemed to be underground. Both ends of the arched passage were sheets of rainwater, and what daylight made it through was gray-green and cheerless.

A van was waiting, windowless and unmarked. The Special took a seat up front, beside the driver. The guards bundled Cicero into the back, and climbed in behind him. He was not entirely surprised to find the compartment's opposite bench already occupied, and the slumped figure of Marius wedged there between two other guards. Marius was in a bad

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way. Unlike Cicero, who was still in the academic robes he'd been wearing when he was arrested, Marius was dressed in green prison coveralls, patched and stained, and some of the stains were fresh. Bloody bandages covered his right eye and right ear; his right side was bloody as well, and there was dried blood and vomit down the front of his chest. Cicero couldn't tell whether he was even conscious.

The engine started, and the van lurched into motion. There was a brief rattle of rain on the roof, and the van stopped again; the doors were opened, and Cicero had a quick glimpse of a wide courtyard, enclosed by high walls and overlooked by towers. Then his view was blocked by the Special again, and two more guards, draped in rain capes and carrying carbines. One of the guards had a tablet and a pen.

"Prisoner number 91264, alias Philip Marius," that one said. The Special gestured to Marius, and the guard looked up, making a note on the tablet. "Prisoner 91186, alias Alexander Cicero." The guard on Cicero's right took Cicero's manacled hands and raised them. The guard with the tablet made another note.

"To be taken from the Alicata Prison to the Imaz Prison," the Special said.

"That's what it says here," the guard with the tablet said. He tore off a sheet and handed it to the Special. "There you go."

"Ta," said the Special.

They closed the doors again, and the van started moving. The storm was blowing in earnest now. Cicero could hear it, the wind shrieking across the roof of the van, throwing rain against the sides like handfuls of gravel. Between the wind and the state of the road, evident in the jouncing of the seat and the noises of complaint from the suspension, he half expected the van to tip over at any moment. It was hot and close, and he found it hard to breathe.

The Imaz. The Alicata was an ordinary prison, for ordinary criminals. The Imaz was where they took the dangerous prisoners, the ones who had tried to escape, and the sort of political prisoners whose allies or followers might be expected to attempt a rescue. He fell into all three categories, he supposed.

How did they get people out to the Imaz, anyway? It was on an island, he knew that, the prison built within the walls of an old medieval seafort. Storm-season waves in the inland sea, funneled by the narrow, cliff-steep shores, regularly topped fifty meters. No boat could survive those waters, and only a brave fool would trust himself to Salomé's rickety, experimental dirigibles—certainly the police, even the Specials, had none.

The van's journey seemed to be tending up, into the hills, not down to the port. Maybe they weren't being taken to the Imaz at all; at least not directly.

The van came to a stop, and, from the cab, Cicero heard muffled conversation. There was the metallic clang of a gate being opened, then the van jerked into motion again, but only for a little while. The wind died down, and the rain on the roof ceased, as they came into a tunnel, or a garage. Where were they?

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The door opened on a dark, clanking space that smelled of machinery, and of the storm. The guards hauled Marius out, and one of them told Cicero: "Out you go, then."

The van was parked beneath a wide sheet-metal awning supported by steel girders. They were at the top of the kilometer-high cliffs that made up most of the inland sea's southern shore, looking out into the storm. Far out to sea, across the white-topped, gray-green waves, the sharp rock of the Imaz emerged from the dark, wind-whipped clouds like the prow of a warship in the fog.

Four cobweb-thin cables, two above and two below, stretched toward them. On the far end they faded into the rain, invisible, but closer by Cicero could see that they were in fact thick as a man's wrist, and steel. Next to the van beneath the awning was a mass of machinery, man-high wheels and pulleys and a clattering steam engine, and Cicero saw that it was drawing in the upper pair of cables, and paying out the lower. He looked out into the storm again and saw a car, suspended between the cables, slowly making its way toward them. Cicero was suddenly overwhelmed with vertigo.

The Special caught his eye and smiled.

"All right with heights, are we, professor?"

Cicero didn't answer.

The car was the size of a railway carriage and crudely streamlined, its corners smoothed and sides rounded by bolted sheets of rust-streaked metal. Despite that, it swayed alarmingly as it approached the cliffs, pulling the cables back and forth, and Cicero could hear the wind shrieking across the car's metal skin. The noise abated as the car came under the awning and thumped to a stop. A hatch opened downward, becoming a short flight of steps, and two guards came out, both of them wearing rain capes and carrying heavy machine pistols.

The Special presented his paperwork, and after a quick examination of it the guards stood respectfully aside.

"After you, professor," the Special said.

The Alicata guards pushed Cicero up the steps and into the car. The interior was lit by a line of incandescent bulbs in wire cages, bolted to the roof. There were four more guards inside, and a number of bare steel benches. The windows of the car were heavily barred.

Marius was brought in on a stretcher, and taken to the other end of the car. Cicero was handed over to the Imaz guards and made to sit, while they fastened his manacles and leg irons to eyebolts beneath the bench.

The Special climbed in, followed by the two Imaz guards, who pulled the door up and dogged it shut. With a lurch, the car began to move, and the wind quickly rose to a screech.

"Time was," the Special said, taking the bench across from Cicero, "the Imaz was cut off from the mainland ten weeks out of the year. The old kings used to hole up there, during their wars; took the Senate four years to winkle them out of there, during the Reunion. This thing—" he tapped the bench "—was put up thirty years ago, after some rioting prisoners managed to set fire to the grain store during storm season. Most of the guards made it through, holed up in the citadel with their own stores. But

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there wasn't one prisoner in twenty left alive by winter when the boats made it across." He gave Cicero a ghoulish smile and added: "Nor many bodies left, neither."

Cicero turned his head away and closed his eyes. The car was dropping swiftly—there was quite a bit of slack in the cables—and it pitched and swayed as the storm winds pushed and lifted it. Cicero's stomach heaved in sympathy, and he realized suddenly why the seats were all bare metal: for ease of cleaning. He opened his eyes again, which was a slight improvement. The Special, Cicero was annoyed to see, looked quite cheerful; he might have been sitting in a parkside café on a sunny day in spring.

The uniformed guards, though, looked more than a little green around the gills. Cicero tried to estimate his chance of disarming one of them and turning his weapon on the others, and thought that without the manacles and leg irons it might be as high as one in three; but the bolts that held the chains were quite secure.

The Special met his eye, and smiled, and Cicero had the uncomfortable feeling that his mind was being read.

Then the car gave a great lurch, sending the Special and all six guards sprawling, and only the prisoners' chains prevented them from being thrown from their seats as well. The lights went out, and the pitch of the wind rose to a scream.

"Fucking hell," growled the Special as he picked himself up. "That happen often?"

"No, sir," one of the Imaz guards said.

"We've stopped moving," said another, looking out the window.

It was true. Not only had they stopped moving out toward the island, but the seasick pitching of the car had died as well.

"Get the emergency lamp," the Special ordered. "Signal the station and find out what the hell's happened."

One of the guards opened a locker beneath one of the benches and took out a battery-operated signal lamp. He went to the end of the car, looking back toward the cliff, and flashed the lamp into the rain.

"It's awful thick out there, sir," he said doubtfully. He turned around. "I don't know if—"

The window behind him imploded, knocking him flat and sending shards of glass and fragments of metal through the car. At the same moment, something—several somethings—hit the sides of the car, and the door blew outward off its hinges.

The Special yelled something, his words impossible to hear over the sudden roar of wind and water, and the car was lit by a white flash as he fired his pistol over the head of the fallen guard. The bullet struck something that Cicero could not quite see, and ricocheted away, shattering another window.

"GET DOWN!" bellowed a woman's amplified voice, a Community voice.

Cicero did his best, leaning forward over his manacled hands. He heard the cracks of electrostatic stunners, and then one of the Imaz guards opened up with his machine pistol; in the muzzle flashes Cicero glimpsed the glassy shape of a suited Outreach missionary, the figure's optical cam-

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ouflage not quite able to keep up with the rapidly changing light inside the car. The figure went down in a shower of bullets, but more were coming in through the door and the blown-out windows. In moments all the guards were down, and the missionaries—four of them, men and women—were shutting off their camouflage, the suits turning to bright solid colors.

The missionary who had been knocked down, his suit now spring green, came over and knelt in front of Cicero. He took out a tool, and in a moment the bolts that secured Cicero's chains began to smoke and glow red.

The missionary lifted his mask to reveal a dark, bearded face.

"Lucius," said Cicero.

"You all right, then?" the man said. Not waiting for an answer, he took out a medical scanner and ran it quickly over Cicero from head to toe.

"I'm fine," Cicero said. "See to Marius."

Lucius smiled. "You're not fine," he said. "But you'll do." He moved back to examine Marius.

A bright yellow suit proved to be Livia, a very unhappy Livia.

"Led us a chase, didn't you?" she said.

"Pressure of circumstance," said Cicero. "Are the others all right?"

"Everyone in Thyatira and the Archipelago got out," Livia said. "We picked Megaera off a hospital roof and Cassia out of the harbor. But Solon's dead; killed resisting arrest. I don't know about Mus and the others in the southeast; one of the other landers was supposed to go after them."

Cicero tried to remember Solon's face, and found that he couldn't, for all that they, and all the on-world missionaries, had trained together for the better part of five subjective years. A small man, Solon, with a highly refined sense of outrage that had served him well in his cover as a muckraking journalist; that was all Cicero could remember.

Livia glanced down, at a display on the inside of her wrist.

"Come on," she said. "*Equity*'s coming for us; we've got twenty minutes, no more." She turned away. To someone unseen, she said: "Drop the rescue lines."

I can't let them take me away, Cicero thought.

As much as he wanted to relax, to let himself be bundled aboard *Equity* like a tired child carried home from a dinner party, he couldn't do that. He realized that, terrible as the idea was to contemplate, on his way to the interrogation rooms of the Imaz he had actually been better off. From there, he at least would have had some chance to turn the Travallese state around, to help Salomé resist the dealers; some chance to see Thalia again.

He stood up quickly.

"Livia," he said. "I have to get back to the city."

Livia turned back.

"You're joking," she said. "*Solidarity*'s been *blown,* Cicero. We've lost track of the dealers' ship; they've deployed about half a thousand decoys and automated fighters over our heads, and *Equity*'s running the gauntlet of them right now, trying to get into position to pick us up. We're leaving this system, Cicero; Outreach is leaving." She glanced at her display

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again. "Eighteen minutes, now." Raising her voice, she said: "Lucius—can we move him?"

Marius answered for himself.

"I can walk," he said. "Just—let's get away from here."

"Right." Livia moved to the door and looked up into the rain.

"Livia—" Cicero said.

"Argue with me on the lander," she said. A safety line dropped down from above; Livia caught it and clipped it to her suit. The pupal form of a rescue harness followed, and she secured it to one of the handrails.

"Here," she said, stepping aside.

Cicero heard the lander's fans surge and whine as they fought to keep the lander airborne and to compensate for the violent winds. He made his way carefully to the door, the wind-driven rain stinging his face. The hull of the lander was a smooth gray curve overhead, its open hatch bright and welcoming, surrounded by white emergency lights.

He looked down. Below—far below—the storm-waves were a dark gray, darker than the lander's hull, gray topped with greenish foam. On one side, the rock of the Imaz rose above them, much taller, and much closer, than Cicero would have thought. On the other, the cliff was a long shadow, and when Cicero tried to follow its line down to where the curve of the great bay should have begun, where he should have been able to make out some trace of the city, the storm dissolved everything.

"Marius," he said suddenly. "You first."

Marius limped up to the door.

"Sure?" he said.

Cicero nodded to the rescue harness. "Go on," he said. "I'm . . ." not leaving, he started to say, but his voice failed.

Marius put a hand on Cicero's shoulder, and Cicero saw that he knew.

"Good luck," he said.

"Go *on,*" said Cicero.

Marius smiled. He started to step into the rescue harness. Then he glanced at something over Cicero's shoulder, and the smile left his face.

"Down!" he yelled, shoving Cicero aside.

Cicero stumbled and fell back into the tram car. There was a shot, somehow louder than any of the barrage that had filled the car a few minutes earlier; and when Cicero looked up he saw the Special up on one knee, pistol held steady in both hands. The Special's eyes met Cicero's, and the pistol moved, and Cicero saw his death there, in a small circle of blackness.

Cicero froze.

Then stun bolts hit the Special from three sides, and the pistol fell from nerveless fingers.

It took Cicero a moment to get to his feet; his muscles didn't want to work.

He turned to thank Marius, but there was no one there.

And when he moved to the door and looked out, there was no one there either.

Only the lander's futile lights, and the storm-waves, and the rain.

* * *

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Thalia didn't know how long she waited. She slept for a while, head down on the table; the chair wasn't comfortable, but it was more comfortable than the cold concrete of the floor.

At one point the lights flickered, and there were raised voices in the hall, but she was unable to make out the words. At another point a guard in a green uniform brought in a tray with a bowl of oily fish soup and a cup of bad tea. The guard didn't answer any of Thalia's questions, or even look her in the eye.

When the door of her cell opened, Thalia expected the Special. Instead there were two armed guards, and another man. The man was on the late side of middle age, and despite his height—he was rather short—walked with a stoop. His hair, where it was not gray, was an odd shade of yellow, like dry leaves. He was wearing a matte gray coat that was not quite like anything Thalia had ever seen before, and he looked as tired as she herself felt.

It was some moments before she recognized him as the man from the Special's photograph of the library steps.

The guards went out, and closed the door behind them.

"Sorry about this," the man said. The words were clear, but his accent was as strange as his coat. "My name's Allen Macleane. I'm with Marginal LLC." He made a strange gesture, holding out his right hand with the fingers together and the palm perpendicular to the floor.

"Yes," Thalia said. "I know. Does this mean you've won?"

Macleane's face reddened, and his hand dropped. He shook his head. "Do you mind if I sit down?" he said.

Wordlessly, Thalia gestured toward the other chair, and Macleane took it.

"Thanks," he said. He looked down for a moment; his fingers traced designs on the table. "I understand your friend Cicero was rescued," he said, looking up. "I thought you'd want to know that. His people hit the tram that was taking him out to the Imaz."

Thalia's heart leapt.

"Does that mean—" she began.

"Does that mean *they* won?" Macleane said. "Not exactly. We destroyed one of their ships; the other one's running. Past the orbit of Herodias now, and still accelerating at two Gs. They won't be back any time soon." He sighed. "But that doesn't mean *we* won, either. Our ship, our only ship, is crippled, maybe destroyed; we're trapped here. Without the ship, we've got no way to contact our own people, and anyhow they're too far away to help. All we've got left in orbit is machines we can't control. Everyone who was on the ship is dead; my own brother is dead."

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"I'm sorry," Thalia said. But she was barely listening; she was thinking about the distances between the stars, and about the Semard professor's new theory of light and time.

Oh, Cicero, she thought. Oh, my heart.

He might as well be dead, she thought, that's what this means; he'll never be back.

But then she thought: No, that's not what it means at all. It means he's alive, out there somewhere; and if they keep going, he'll be alive still, when I'm an old woman and can no longer remember his face, he'll still be young, preserved in slow time like amber, out there between the stars, chasing the light.

And that was a reason to be thankful. That was a reason to go on.

She realized that tears were running down her cheeks.

I have to pull myself together, she thought. This man will think I'm crying for his brother.

But she looked up into Allen Macleane's lined face and saw that he was wiser than that.

"We both lost," Macleane said gently. "*You've* won, don't you see? The people of Salomé have won."

"What do you mean?" Thalia said.

"We came here thinking you were a bunch of barbarians," Macleane said. "Primitives. I'm sure Outreach—your friend Cicero's people—thought the same way. We didn't take you seriously, you see. When you, I mean the Travallese government, moved against us, we figured that Outreach was behind it, just like they figured we were behind the government's moves against them." He smiled. "Both of us were watching each other so carefully, we forgot there was a third party at the table—*you*. You played us off against each other beautifully, and we never knew you were doing it."

"Mr. Macleane," Thalia said. "I'm not a player in your game. I'm not even a pawn. I'm a spectator. I have only the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"I'm sorry," Macleane said. "I didn't mean you, personally. But your people have got us right where they want us. There are only about twenty of us left. If we're going to survive here it's going to be on their charity."

"Not my people, Mr. Macleane." Thalia lifted her manacled hands. "Charity isn't what the Senate of Travalle is noted for."

"I know," Macleane said. "They'll milk us for everything we've got. History, stellar geography, basic science. Technology; weapons, especially, and spacecraft, so they can deal with the next alien arrival on their own terms." He shook his head. "They don't understand what they're up against."

"I'm not one of you, Mr. Macleane," she said. "I'm not Travallese, either. If Cicero was against you, then so am I. What does this have to do with me?"

"They tell me you're good at mathematics," Macleane said.

"I'm *amazing* at mathematics," said Thalia.

Macleane smiled.

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"Would you like a job?"

They'd had to sedate Cicero to get him aboard the lander. Livia wasn't happy about that, and trouble would undoubtedly come of it later. But clearly, he'd been raving, demanding to be left aboard the wrecked tram car, even after the locals had shot Marius.

Livia checked her displays. The other landers, with their own cargoes of evacuees, were keeping pace. Behind them, as the dealers' automated fighter fleet and the Outreach mission's rear guard finished annihilating each other, the mad fireworks display of fusion bombs and antimatter explosions was finally dying out, after turning Salomé's night into day.

There was no telling which side, if either, had gained the upper hand back there, but it didn't matter; neither Livia nor Galen wanted to take any more chances, and they were committed, now.

Lucius came forward from checking on Cicero, moving slowly and cautiously under three gravities of acceleration.

"He'll be fine," Livia said.

Lucius shook his head. "But will he be fine when he wakes up?" he said.

Livia didn't answer, though what she thought was: Damned if I was going to come back without *either* of them.

On the forward display, the violet flare of *Equity*'s drive died, as the starship briefly collapsed its ram field and cut its torch to allow the landers to catch up. Faster than seemed possible, the dark bulk of the ship swept up on them; they floated free for a moment as the lander's autopilot cut their own thrust, and there was a jerk and a metallic thump as the grapples caught.

Then the thrust built as the starship's torch came to life again, and they ran for the safety of the deep. ❍

Continued from page 11

18TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **JIM BURNS**
2. Fred Gambino
3. Mark Garlick
4. Michael Carroll
5. Michael Koelsch
6. Jean-Pierre Normand
7. John Allemand
8. Martina Pilcerova

Our Readers' Awards were announced, along with *Analog*'s Anlab Awards, at a breakfast ceremony during SFWA's Nebula Banquet weekend at the Westin Hotel in Seattle, Washington, April 15th to 18th, 2004. Guests included Robert Silverberg, Karen Haber, Connie Willis, Joe and Gay Haldeman, Megan Lindholm, Leslie What, Nisi Shawl, and L. Timmel Duchamp.

As promised, all ballots were automatically entered in a drawing for a free one-year subscription to *Asimov's*. The winner of this year's drawing was Gustavo Moro from Hayward, California.

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THINGS YOU CAN'T AVOID AS AN IMMORTAL

Looking in the mirror
and thinking your eyes
reveal your age.

Pausing before you speak.

The holocaust of history
leaving its brand
on the portraits
you have yet to paint.

Petting you own perfect
body on the nights
you spend alone.

Losing countless children
while you live on.

An interminable sense
of déjà-vu.

Being out of style.

The heat death
of the universe.

—Bruce Boston

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BRETHREN

Meredith Simmons

Making up for a misspent youth when a keyboard was anathema, Meredith Simmons has been busy writing away. She's about to finish a second novel and two of her short stories will soon appear in *Paradox* and *Arabella*. In "Brethren," she offers a brief glimpse of the traits that make us human.

Pilgrims come, Betta signed, the thick juvenile fringes on her fingers making the abrupt comment graceful in the heavy air. Hof was pleased that she'd used the polite term for their visitors. His constant lectures about the Exiles' ability to read sign must have finally gotten Betta's attention. He was thankful, however, that the Pilgrims couldn't read the scorn implicit in her body language, or distinguish the heavy scent of laughter that permeated the air. He could not stop his own odor of humor from escaping. They *were* funny, plodding along in their unwieldy suits, arms outstretched for balance as they threaded their way between the fissures and the vents.

This would be Marta Clirr's group, and they tended to be heavy spenders. Marta did a good job of priming them, of getting them excited about the thermal vents and volcanic activity. And she always released the group for shopping directly in front of his booth, pointing out that Hof offered low-mass, wafer-thin rocks. Even though his rocks were more expensive than others', the Exiles would usually buy a lot, since they could fit more specimens into their mass limit. Consequently, Hof found his life and profits were both very good.

After stopping to contemplate the wonders of "Old Smoky," the Pilgrims lumbered up the path provided by the Tourist Authority, their suit-lights blurring in the nutrient rich air. Hof wondered what it would be like to be encased in metal, to have no direct contact with the planet, to always be separated from one's origins. Pathetic, these Exiles were. Pathetic in their primitiveness, in their delusion that to be non-evolved was in some way superior. These Pilgrims were descendants of the broken branch of humanity that was thrown into space because it would wither on Earth. But their money was good, their technology was good. It wasn't their fault their ancestors had been fools.

"We're about to be attacked by the Worms again," Raygo Nor said over the general com. "I wonder what they're peddling this time." Jase chinned

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his com button off. He was sick of Nor's snippy comments, sick of his whole attitude. Jase wondered why Raygo had even bothered to come. He guessed that wearing the Pilgrims' Blue Sphere was considered chic in some circles, but that seemed a weak reason for making such a long and expensive trip.

Not that Jase's own motives necessarily made sense. "It's always been my dream," he'd told his mother. "And with Uncle Tel's bequest, I can live that dream. To actually walk on the Earth, not just experience it through vids or holos." Jase thought that had sounded better than saying he was bored with the sameness of ship and station life, that he craved adventure and wanted to see the only other sapience in the galaxy.

After millennia of questing, humans *had* found other life, but only bacteria and viruses and pond scum. The only *intelligent* life had been themselves and those they'd left behind, the Remnant Population. And that Remnant Population was more exotic and foreign than anything Jase could imagine finding around some far-flung star.

The Remnants were the offspring of humans who stubbornly wouldn't leave an increasingly hostile Earth. Run-away greenhouse effect had changed the atmosphere and the topography of the planet, forcing most of humanity first to Sol Station, and then to the stars beyond. The adventurous, the knowledgeable, had claimed the universe as humankind's destiny. The Remnants, however, had tenaciously struggled to adapt; many had died, but they'd eventually found salvation in the genes of the deep-ocean tubeworms. After generations of gene-splicing, the creatures that emerged didn't resemble their human ancestors, but Jase was confident that within each pale, frilled body there dwelt a human mind with human thoughts and desires.

Jase found the Remnants strange—wonderfully, fascinatingly strange. Like the one who now stood before him in the souvenir booth. Jase knew she was a juvenile, the deeply fringed cilia blushed red with the blood needed to carry maximum nutrition for growth.

What would you suggest? he signed to the child, his gloves making his movements clumsy. The Remnant's hands, by contrast, flowed, a veritable song of movement, as she pointed out first one slice of rock and then another. Jase admired the Remnants' graceful language, thinking it compensated for their being both deaf and mute.

These are the best, she said, indicating a group at the end of the booth. *And this one is my favorite.* She reached for a large disk incised with glyphs that hung on a string from a beam. One second she was stretching for the item—and the next she was gone.

Jase blinked and leaned over the side of the booth. His suit-light pierced the murky air, revealing the crumbling edge of a deep fissure. About a meter down, the juvenile clung to the rock face. Her hand wavered in the first sign the guide had taught them, *Help. Help.*

Jase didn't think to call out over the com. He just immediately reacted to a child in danger. He edged his bulky body around the end of the booth and reached for the flailing hand. He stretched further, ponderous and unbalanced, and then her hand wrapped around his. He straightened and pulled, delighted that he could easily lift her.

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Just as her feet settled safely on the rim of the fissure, something happened, Jase couldn't say what, but suddenly *he* was falling. Generations of space-faring people screamed in his mind, as he instinctively fought against the tug of a planet's gravity. His hands frantically sought purchase on the rock face even while he watched for the light warning of suit rupture. And then his feet found a shelf and he balanced on it amid a rain of pebbles and other debris.

His own harsh, rapid breathing nearly deafened him to the voice over his com. "Just hold tight and don't move. The fissure wall is unstable. Help is coming." Marta Clirr's voice. Confident, calming. He could see other suit-lights flashing dimly at the top of the rim.

He flattened himself against the wall and stood perfectly still. Even then, he could feel some slight movement under his feet. "I think the ledge I'm on is crumbling," he said, trying to sound composed and in control, all the while wanting to call out, "Help me, help me," much as the child had done. Then a large white body appeared, climbing over the edge. The adult Remnant at the booth, Jase guessed. He followed a weaving pattern down the rock face, seeming to find handholds that Jase could not even perceive.

I will support, guide, the Remnant signed, his large eyes luminescent in the suit-light, his pseudo-mouth held in a small "O." He repeated his instructions twice before Jase got nerve enough to loosen a hand to signal that he understood. *Not far,* the Remnant said, motioning upward.

Jase could see a suited figure leaning toward him, hand outstretched. He felt the Remnant move behind and beneath him, then a pressure on his right foot. He relaxed that leg and the Remnant pushed up, lifting Jase's boot and sliding it into a crevice in the rock wall. Jase felt pressure on his left boot now, and the Remnant slowly guided it to another slot. In this manner, Jase and his rescuer inched up the rock face. Finally, a seeming eternity later, Jase grabbed the gloved hand that helped pull him to the surface. Panting, he awkwardly flopped over the edge. "Oh no!" Martha Clirr's voice echoed through the com.

"What?" Jase shouted, already feeling for a tear in his suit, frantically checking his read-outs.

"You *kicked* him. You didn't mean to, but you kicked him as you came over the edge."

Jase immediately turned around and stared into the fissure. There was no rescuing Remnant. His suit-light illuminated only the barren rocks that stretched away into darkness.

Jase stared out the view port on Sol Station, watching Earth float in the inky darkness of space. The mesh sunscreen, put up as a last attempt to cool the surface, formed a gray, sparkling mass that obscured the now thick atmosphere beneath. The Earth of reality wasn't much like the gaudy blue sphere he'd been given as a badge of his Pilgrimage. One of the many lies we space-faring humans tell ourselves, Jase thought. Just as most of us secretly believe that the Remnant Population is no longer human. We're all tinged with the superiority exhibited by people like Raygo Nor. But Jase's recent experience showed *that* idea to be a lie also.

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The Remnant who had died helping Jase had obviously felt the same human impulse that had prompted Jase to reach to help the child.

Jase hoped the money he'd sent back down to the planet with Marta would help the man's family. It was the least he could do, and, thanks to his uncle, he could easily afford the gesture. He just hoped that Marta would remember to tell the family that Jase would forever carry the knowledge that, regardless of how different they appeared externally, he and the Remnant population were brothers.

Half is too much, Hof signed. *Betta scraped herself badly this time. A third is fair since we take all the risk.*

What risk? Marta's hands were fluent. *You know all the handholds and where to hide beneath the ledge, so you're not at risk. If Betta was hurt it was her own clumsiness. The scheme wouldn't work at all if I didn't signal you when there was a rich idealist in the group.*

Hof settled back to enjoy the bargaining. It was always thus after a successful encounter with one of the Exiles. Marta would ask for half, but would eventually agree to 40 percent. Sometimes they reached that number faster than other times. But they both enjoyed the thrust and parry of making the deal, the flush of a gambit well played.

Hof looked at the suited figure and thought, not for the first time, that it was too bad he couldn't pick up the scent of Marta's emotions. He suspected that they were the same as his own. Beneath the glaring faceplate and the strangely mobile face, there lurked a brain much like his. Shared traits, he thought. The odor of humor spread around him as Hof digested the idea that he and the Exiles were brothers after all. ○

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THE PASHO

Paolo Bacigalupi

Paolo Bacigalupi is currently holed up with a wife and child in western Colorado where he toils for an environmental newspaper. Ideas for his first tale for *Asimov's*, "The Pasho," were influenced by his time spent traveling in the minority regions of southern China. Previously, his writing has appeared in *F&SF*. Mr. Bacigalupi's short story, "The Fluted Girl," was selected for three year's-best anthologies.

The acrid scent of burning dung carried easily on the dry wind. Raphel Ka' Korum breathed once, deeply, tasting memory, then fastened his electrostatic scarf over his face and turned to receive his luggage from the passengers still on the fat wheel.

Wind gusted around them. Scarves came loose and flapped wildly in the stinging air and brown hands snatched at the ragged free flying banners before tucking them, sparking and crackling, over dust-caked noses and mouths. A man, Kai by his crucifix, Keli by his silk shirt, handed down Raphel's leather satchel, then pressed his palms together and ducked his head in ritual sterile farewell. Raphel did the same. The rest of the passengers, a motley conglomeration of basin people all stuffed tightly in the bed of the fat wheel, made gestures of their own, observing scrupulous politeness to his Pasho's robes and attainment marks.

The fat wheel slowly rolled away. Its bulbous jelly tires crunched on the Dry Basin's hardpan. Raphel watched the beat-up vehicle recede. Its passengers observed him in turn, their eyes full of questions at the Keli Pasho who disembarked in the center of the desert. Raphel turned to face his village.

The round haci of the Jai huddled in the barren basin like a small mob of conical-hatted refugees, their pointed heads jammed tight together, their adobe robes splattered with white Jai geometric patterns. Around them, clay-clotted fields lay tilled and patient as wind blew across them, ripping dust devils into the air and sending them dancing across the pale plain. In the far distance, the bones of the old city stuck up from the basin in a tangled mass of steel and concrete ruin, silent and abandoned for more generations than even the Jai could remember.

Raphel unwrapped his scarf and once again breathed deeply, taking in the scents of home, sniffing at nostalgia, letting it fill the depths of his

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lungs. Dust and burning dung and sage blown from the distant hills intermingled. Somewhere within the village, meat was grilling. A coyote or rabbit, likely stunned into sonic paralysis and skinned before it regained consciousness, now dripping fat onto open coals. Raphel inhaled again and licked his lips. Already they chapped in the aridity. His skin, long accustomed to Keli's lush humidity, felt tight on his face, as though he wore a mask that would fall away at any moment.

He glanced back wistfully at the receding fat wheel, a child's toy slowly creeping toward the distant muddy line where blue sky finally touched yellow clay. Sighing, Raphel shouldered his satchel and headed for the village.

The few scattered haci at the village outskirts quickly sidled close. They formed a tightly packed mass of thick walls and claustrophobic alleys. Streets twisted randomly, inviting invaders to stumble into cul-de-sacs and death courts. Sonic bulbs dangled overhead, their beaks gaping, eager to scream.

Raphel wandered amongst the Jai defenses along a path of childhood memories. He recognized Bia' Giomo's haci, and remembered how she had paid in sugar rocks when he brought her water from the well. He recognized the thick blue door to Evia's courtyard, and remembered hiding together beneath her parent's bed, stifling laughter while her parents groaned and creaked above them. His mother had written to him that Bia' Giomo had passed beyond and that Evia was called Bia' Dosero and now lived at Clear Spring Village.

Raphel turned another corner, and recognized Old Martiz squatting outside his haci. Red beans boiled over the old man's dung fire, slowly congealing into porridge. Raphel smiled and started to greet the old man, but as soon as Martiz saw Raphel, he grabbed his bean pot and scrambled backward, desperate to keep Quaran.

Raphel hastily pulled his scarf back over his face and ducked his head in apology. Martiz softened enough to set down his beans and press his palms together. Raphel returned the ancient gesture. He could have told Martiz the source of the Quaran gesture and how it had spread during the Cleansing, but Martiz was unlikely to care. For the Jai it was custom, and that was enough. Jai observed the old ways. In Keli, people shook hands and hardly observed Quaran at all. The trading culture easily discarded careful traditions of past survival. The Jai had longer memories.

Raphel skirted Martiz by the prescribed two meters of sunlight and threaded deeper into the village. The alley narrowed to a tight path between squeezing walls. He turned sideways and scraped through a kill-slot, its walls pressing against his chest and shoulder blades. At the far end of the kill-slot, he paused to brush ineffectually at the adobe dust that clung to his white robes.

Children's laughter echoed. Young Jai boys, their robes bright crimson splashes against the pale yellow clay of the haci, dashed down the alley toward him. They stopped short, staring at his Pasho's white robes and attainment marks, then pressed their brown hands together and ducked their heads in careful respect. A moment later they were past him and continuing their chase, slipping through the kill-slot with the easy limberness of basin lizards.

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Raphel turned to watch them, remembering when he had dashed down the self-same alley, chasing friends, pretending that he was a hook-hand crusader, pretending he himself led the war against the Keli. It seemed a long time ago. The boys' red flapping robes disappeared beyond the kill-slot, leaving Raphel alone in the alley.

Raphel cleared his throat and swallowed several times, trying to relieve its constricting dryness. He inhaled again, deeply, hungry for the scent of his native place. His scarf crackled and he breathed sterile air.

"A Pasho's responsibilities are often convoluted. How can one know in advance the consequences of an action? It is a Pasho's duty to peer into the nooks and crannies of possibility and only proceed with caution. Slow change is a virtue. For a society to survive the upheavals of technology, the race and culture must adapt. It is not enough that clever fingers learn to work a plough in a few short days, the culture must also be readied for its expanding population, its shift to agriculture, the willy nilly follow-on ripples of technology introduction. Without proper preparation, moral and philosophical, how can any culture be trusted with a technology as casually violent as a gun?"

—Pasho Giles Martin, CS 152. (Lectures on Moral Change)

"You must be very proud, Bia' Pasho." Bia' Hanna smiled at Raphel as she spoke. Gold flashed in her mouth and the crow's feet at the edges of her desert eyes deepened.

"Proud?" Raphel's mother laughed. She took a pot of newly boiled tea from the hearth fire and turned to eye Raphel where he sat separated from them by three meters, electrostatic scarf covering his face. "Proud that my only son abandons his family for ten years? Proud that he turns from his family in favor of Keli and its thousand lakes?" She shook her head and poured tea into Bia' Hanna's clay cup. The thick black liquid, its source leaves dried and fermented over her own hearthfire, sent up smoke-laden scents as it splashed into the glazed clay.

"But a Pasho, a Jai Pasho." Bia' Hanna's marriage bangles clinked as her wrinkled hand reached for the steaming cup. She and all her friends sat in Raphel's family home, clustered around his mother, a bright seething mass of laughing blue-swathed married women all happy and excited to be invited for the occasion of a family reunion.

Bia' Hanna's gold teeth flashed at Raphel again. She was proud of the dental work she had received at the border of Keli and smiled willingly and widely. "Yes, you must be so proud. Your son returned to you and a Pasho already, at his age." She sipped her tea appreciatively. "You make the best smoke tea, Bia' Pasho."

"Stop already with this 'Bia' Pasho' nonsense. I was Bia' Raphel before. I am Bia' Raphel now, whatever my foolish son has done." Raphel's mother turned to refill another woman's cup, one hand deftly holding the blackened steel pot, the other twining around the blue folds of her skirts, keeping them from dragging on the floor.

Bia' Hanna laughed. "So modest. But look how handsome he is with his attainment marks." She pointed at Raphel. "Look at his hands, Jai Bia'.

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The script on his face, so much knowledge on his skin, and that only a tiny portion of what sloshes inside his shaven head."

Raphel ducked his head and stared at his hands, vaguely embarrassed at the women's sudden attention. On the back of his left hand were his first attainment marks: the old alphabet in tiny script. From there, lettering the color of dried blood marched up his arms and stole under his robes. Denotations of rising rank, ritually applied over the years, the chanted mnemonic devices of the ten thousand stanzas, hooks into the core of Pasho knowledge, each one a memory aid and mark of passage. They covered his body in the spiking calligraphy of the ancients, sometimes a mere symbol to hook a bound tome's worth of knowledge, something to recall, and ensure that all Pasho trained later might have access to an unchanging spring of wisdom.

Raphel looked up in time to catch the quirk of a smile on his mother's face. Bia' Hanna also spied his mother's quickly hidden pleasure. Bia' Hanna slapped his mother on the hip as she turned to pour for another woman. "Ah there! You see, Jai Bia'? You see how the mother flushes with pride at the son's accomplishment? You watch, she'll be seeking a wife for him before the sun touches the basin rim." She cackled, her gold teeth glinting in the dim light of the family haci. "Lock up your daughters, Jai Bia', she'll want to harvest them all for her tattooed son!"

The other women laughed and joined in the teasing, commenting on Bia' Pasho's good fortune. They shot smiles and evaluating glances in Raphel's direction His mother laughed and accepted their jokes and adulation, Bia' Raphel no longer: Bia' Pasho. Mother of the Pasho. A great honor.

"Look! He thirsts!" Bia' Hanna cried, and motioned toward Raphel's empty cup. "You ignore our new Pasho!"

Raphel smiled. "No, Bia', I only wait to speak between your outbursts."

"Cheeky Pasho. If we didn't keep Quaran, I'd redden your bottom. Don't forget it was I who caught you uprooting bean plants when you were no higher than my hip."

The women laughed. Bia' Hanna played to her audience, waving her arms in outrage. "He said he only wished to help—"

"It's true!"

"—And what was left? Nothing but shredded greens! As though the dust devils had torn through it. It's a good thing he has a new profession, Bia' Pasho. Your fields would never survive his return."

The Jai women all laughed as Bia' Hanna continued, recalling Raphel's childhood transgressions: rock sugar that disappeared whenever a woman blinked, electrostatic masks reversed, goats with flaming tails, the tales poured out of her golden mouth. Finally, her fountain of memory apparently depleted, she paused and eyed Raphel. "Tell me, revered Pasho, do the Keli people really eat fish? Straight from their lakes?"

Raphel laughed. "They ask if we really eat coyote."

"Yes, yes. But custom, Raphel . . . you didn't eat fish, did you?"

The women fell silent, watching him, their breath unconsciously held for the answer.

Raphel smiled slightly. "No. Of course not."

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Bia' Hanna laughed. "There, you see Jai Bia'? Blood will tell. You can take the Jai to Keli, but blood will tell. Blood always tells."

The women nodded knowingly, pretending satisfaction, but their eyes betrayed relief that he had not broken Jai custom. A Jai would die before eating tainted flesh. Jai observed the old ways.

The women's conversations began again. Raphel was forgotten in the speculation over what day the rain would come and whether Bia' Renado's daughter had been seen too often in the company of a married hook hand.

Raphel glanced toward the doorway. Sunlight burned in the courtyard beyond. Male voices filtered in with the heat and light: his father and his hook hand friends. Soon he would join them. They would push a ritual cup of mez toward him, and then step back carefully, keeping Quaran. Ten heartbeats later, he would raise his cup from the courtyard stones and they would toast the blue sky, pour a splash into the dust, and drink until the harsh liquor evaporated from the baked earth. They would perform the ritual again and again, pouring and drinking, getting drunker and drunker until the sun touched the horizon and the bones of the old city turned red in the failing light.

If Raphel listened carefully, he could make out the men's conversation. His father's voice, laughing: "He didn't get his smarts from me. It must have been his grandfather," and then all the hook hands laughing as they recalled Old Gawar, a man whose hook knives swirled like tornadoes and who spat on the graves of the Pasho he had delivered during the Keli crusade. Legendary deeds from a legendary time. Now, Keli's fat wheels wandered the Dry Basin with impunity, Jai children listened to earbuds full of Keli transmitter stations and spoke with Keli slang, and Old Gawar's grandchild was stained from head to toe with the Keli Pasho's secrets.

Raphel remembered his grandfather: a withered skinny man who wore his red robes cut open so that the virile white fur of his bony chest tufted out for all to see. A man among men. A great Jai, even at a century and a half. Raphel remembered the old man's black hawk eyes, piercing, as he dragged Raphel close to whisper deeds of bloodshed, teaching him a Jai's understanding of life, muttering darkness into Raphel's ears until his mother caught them and dragged Raphel away, scolding Old Gawar for frightening the boy, and Gawar, sitting paralyzed in his chair, watching and smiling and content, his black bloody eyes on his descendant.

Raphel shook his head at the memory. Even in far away Keli the old man had whispered bloodshed into his dreams. A hard man to forget. In Keli, more so. Vestiges of his presence lingered everywhere: monuments to the Keli dead, lakes poisonous with burn residue, the hackings of hook-knives on marble statues, the skeletal ruins of buildings burned and never reconstructed. Where Raphel dreamed of his grandfather, the Keli people tossed in nightmare.

Raphel stood carefully and wrapped his robes around him. The women swayed back, unconsciously keeping Quaran, three meters indoors, two meters in clean sunlight, and so it would continue for ten days or until he was dead. Tradition. In Keli, they no longer observed the old ways. Here, it was pointless to explain that the scourge was long gone. The custom

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was too deeply ingrained, as rigidly respected as handwashing before meals, and planting days before the rains.

Raphel slipped into the oven heat of the courtyard. His father and the other hook hands called to him. Raphel waved, but did not join the drinking. Soon he would join them and drink himself into a mez stupor, but not until his pilgrimage was complete.

"Mez, is, of course, poisonous in large doses, and even in small amounts the toxins build up over time, impairing a disproportionate number of the male population.

"The Jai follow a ritual of distillation for the desert plant that renders its toxins less potent, but custom dictates that they allow a certain percentage to remain. Early efforts to reform the brewing of mez were met with hostility. If a Pasho were to seek to reform the practice, it would best come from within the community as there is too much distrust in the Jai for outside influences."

—Pasho Eduard, CS 1404. (Recovered document, Dry Basin Circuit, XI 333)

The haci was old, older than most in the village, and sat near its center, at the joining of three alleys. It commanded a good killing view of their confluence and its walls were thick, built for a time when bullets had been more than myths and blood flowed down the alleys many times each generation.

Up close, the haci showed its age. Settlement cracks crept along its clay walls. Long lines like vines threaded across its face, breeding ruin into its structure. Its thick wooden doors were thrown open, exposing peeling sky-blue paint and silvered splintered wood. A fraying electrostatic curtain swayed in the doorway, black and red interwoven, in Jai traditional style.

Raphel stood at the haci's curtained doorway, peering into the darkness. From inside, metal scraped rhythmically. It was a comforting sound. A Jai sound. He had grown up listening to that familiar rasp, listening at his grandfather's knee as the old man told stories. The metal continued its scraping. In his mind, Raphel was eight again, sucking sugar rocks and squatting beside his grandfather as the man whispered bloodshed.

"I burned Keli to the ground," the old man had said and his eyes had blazed as though he could see the pillage still. "I burned Heli, Seli, and Keli. Last of all I burned Keli. Its canals were no defense. Its green gardens burned in our napalm bath. Keli's women fled before us, those silly girls with long black braids and silver belts. We burned that city and taught those soft water people what it is to rule the Jai. We are not ruled by bureaucrats. The Jai control our own destinies. We are not the dirty Kai who choose slavery and have no words. We bathe every morning, charge our sonics in the afternoon, and write dust epitaphs for our enemies under the stars." He had chuckled. "We burned Keli. Burned it to the ground."

Raphel called into the haci's dimness, "Grandfather?"

The scrape of metal stopped. Then started again. Over a nearby wall, children played a game with stones, trying to knock one another's casts

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away from a central stake. Their shrieks of pleasure and disappointment echoed in the heat.

"Grandfather?" Raphel called again.

The scrape of metal stopped. Raphel leaned close to the doorway's curtain. Wind rustled through the courtyard, hot breeze making the curtain sway gently. Raphel strained his ears. The slow sigh of breathing came from within. Finally a voice rasped. "So, you've come back."

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Let me see."

Raphel pushed aside the curtain and slipped inside, his fingers tingling in the curtain's static. Inside, the air was cool. He tightened his scarf, pulling it close around his face as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. Shapes slowly resolved. His grandfather sat near the hearth, a slumped shadow. A hook knife and a sharpening stone glimmered in his hands. The hearth was cold and black. At one side of the room the man's pallet lay on the floor, its bedding knotted and unmade. His clothing was scattered carelessly. Only the hook knives on the walls seemed cared for. Their edges shone in the dim light, prizes from men sent beyond.

The old man's shadow body shifted. The hook knife in his hand glinted. "A Pasho. A Keli Pasho."

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Your mother must be pleased."

"Yes."

The old man laughed, then coughed. "Brainless woman. Wringing her hands so her bangles always chime. Probably already seeking a match for you." He laughed again. "I suppose you think you are an important man now that you've committed the ten thousand stanzas to memory?"

"No."

The old man jerked his head toward a picture on the wall. "Why not? Your image comes before you."

Raphel turned to examine the photograph, a picture of himself wrapped in Pasho robes, standing and smiling with the head of the Keli Pasho. His tattoos were newly inscribed, still dark and clear on his skin. The elder man's were faded into the folds of his skin, as though the knowledge inscribed had settled deeply into the old Pasho's being. "I don't ask the people to revere me," Raphel said.

"And yet they do. Ahh, of course they do. The Pasho make sure of that. Your dogs go before you, spreading your pictures, telling stories of your wisdom." The old man laughed. "Everyone believes a Pasho when he speaks. The all-seeing all-benevolent Pasho. Who would beg wisdom from a Jai when a Pasho sits among them?"

"I am Jai, and Pasho. They are not incompatible."

"You think not?" The black shadow of the man coughed laughter, a harsh explosion of humor that faded into labored breathing. His hook knife glinted movement and then he was sharpening again. The sharp scrape of metal on stone was rhythmic, filling the haci. He rasped, "I burned Keli to the ground. Would you do the same? Your Pasho friends are there. Keli girls are there. I slaughtered them all. That is Jai."

Raphel squatted on the hard-packed dirt of the haci, three meters from

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his grandfather. He pulled his robes around him and settled to the ground, cross-legged. "No mean feat to burn a water city."

The old man glanced up slyly before returning to his sharpening. "Even water burns."

"Napalm. That weapon should have been forgotten."

"According to the Pasho. But Jai have long memories. We keep our own records and have very long memories, don't we, Grandson?"

"Keli people, also. Your name is remembered there still."

"Is it?"

"They spit when they speak of you."

The old man wheezed laughter. "That's good." He stopped his sharpening and looked up at Raphel, eyes narrowed with suspicion. "And did you spit with them?"

"What do you think?"

The old man pointed his hook knife at Raphel. "I think your skin cries out for Keli's clear pools and your fingers tingle to touch a Keli girl's silken braid. That is what I think." He returned to his sharpening. "I think your nose twitches for the scent of lilac on the thousand lakes."

"I may have studied in Keli, Grandfather, but I am still Jai."

"So you say," the old man muttered. He set down his knife and sharpening stone and turned toward a shelf beside him. His thin fingers came up with a thick glass bottle. "Will you drink?"

Raphel hastily gathered his robes and made to stand. "I should pour."

The old man laughed and cringed away. "And break Quaran?" He shook his head. "You have been in Keli too long. Keep your distance, Grandson." He uncorked the bottle and poured two clay cups of mez. The bright tingling scent of the liquor filled the dim room. The old man carefully lowered himself to the floor and pushed the cup until it sat midway between himself and his grandson, before dragging his crippled body slowly back into the shadows and hoisting himself up to his seat against the hearthwall. Raphel waited the requisite ten beats of the heart, then leaned forward and pulled the clay cup close.

"To our ancestors." The old man raised his cup to the heavens, then poured a splash on the ground. "May they not be abandoned by their descendants."

"May we always honor them." Raphel mirrored his grandfather's motions, pouring the liquor onto the ground. Its drops clustered like opals on the dirt. The white heat of the liquor burned in his chest as he drank.

His grandfather watched him drink. "Not as smooth as Keli's rice wine, is it?"

"No."

"Well, you're fortunate. The Keli sell their wine here, now. Many drink it."

"I've seen."

The old man leaned forward. "Why do they peddle their wine in the Dry Basin, Grandson? Do they not see we are Jai? Do they not understand they have no business here?"

"If it bothers you, you could sell mez to Keli."

"Mez is for Jai. Baji is for Keli."

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Raphel sighed. "Do you somehow become less Jai if you drink their rice wine? Does it seep into a man and turn him all at once into something different?" He took another sip of the burning mez. "Even you have drunk rice wine."

The old man waved his hand dismissively. "Only when I sacked their water city."

"But still, it touched your desert tongue." Raphel smiled. "Did it make you Keli?"

Old Gawar flashed a hard smile. "Ask the Keli people."

"It is the same for me."

"You? You are a chained pet. I'm sure the Keli enjoyed your toothless desert bite. You're not Jai. You're one of them, now."

"It's not so. Keli people know instantly that I am Jai: my accent, my eyes, my hook knife, my laugh, my observance of the old ways. No matter how long I walk Keli's bridges or swim in their thousand lakes, I will never be Keli."

The old man made a face of irritation. "And because Keli rejects you, you believe you are Jai?"

Raphel toasted his grandfather with his clay cup of mez. "I am sure of it."

"No!" The old man slammed his cup down. It shattered, splashing liquor and leaving shards. He swept the shards away, careless of their sharp points. "You are not Jai! If you were Jai, you would not sit there talking. You would draw your hook knife and cut me down for insulting you."

"That is not Jai. That is you, Grandfather."

The old man reached for the edge of his hearth and slowly pulled himself upright, a crippled skeletal hawk of a man, eyes bright with the fires of past bloodshed. His voice, full of conviction, rasped as he clutched the hearth's chimney for support. "What I do is Jai. I am Jai." He pulled himself taller. "You Pasho want the Jai to set down our hook knives and bury our sonics so no one will hear their wail. You keep technology from us and give it to Keli. You cannot deny history. We Jai have letters, we keep our own records of the past. We know Pasho trickery. When I burned Keli, the Pasho fell like wheat under my hook knife. I stained their white robes red. Tell me that they have forgotten me. Tell me they don't seek to bury the Jai still!"

Raphel made placating motions with his hands, urging his grandfather back to his seat. "That time is past. We Jai no longer make war on Keli, nor the Pasho who happen to live there."

Old Gawar smiled thinly and rubbed at his crippled leg. "War never ends. I taught you that."

"You squat in Keli's nightmares still."

"A pity they don't learn their lesson and stay on their side of the mountains." Old Gawar chuckled and slowly eased himself back to his seat. "When we burn Keli next, we won't show mercy. The Keli accent will not poison our children's ears again."

"You can't keep the outside world from the Dry Basin forever."

"So says the Pasho. My own grandson, who comes to betray us."

"Knowledge is a Jai birthright as much as a Keli's."

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"Don't feed me carrion. You come like all Pasho, with knowledge outstretched in one hand while you wait to seize influence with the other. You sit cross-legged, meditating like the ancient wise ones, and then you advise our people to sink water veins, to lend themselves to your road projects and factories, but I know your true object."

"We're building civilization, Grandfather."

"You are the death of us."

"Because Jai wells will be full, even when the dry season doubles?"

"Is that what you offer?" The old man laughed bitterly. "Water wells always full? A better breed of the red bean plant? Something to make our lives easier? To make our children live longer?" He shook his head. "I've watched your cult of the Open Eye long enough to know what Pasho are about. Even the Keli who worship you couldn't pull salvation from your tattooed fists when we attacked. We Jai slaughtered those soft water people like goats. You are not a savior. You are the death of us. Get out, Grandson. Get out of my home. Whatever you are, you are not Jai."

"Writing is the key to survival. A culture which can write, can remember, and share its knowledge widely. The First Attainment mark must always be the alphabet, the key to all other knowledge. With an alphabet, what I write today may be learned a thousand years from now, by some young student who will never know me except through my hand on paper. When all of us are dust, our learning will survive and we hope, with time, civilization will thrive again."

—Pasho Mirriam Milliner, CS 13. (On Survival)

The sharp clicking of his mother's tongue woke him, a gentle tap tap from the vicinity of his doorway.

He had been dreaming of Keli. Dreaming that he stood again in front of the Pasho libraries and stared up at Milliner's statue. Dreaming that he ran his fingers along the hook knife hackings at its base, that he stared up at the founder of the Pasho order, carved in marble mid-escape. Milliner fled with one hand forward, Pasho's open eye on his palm. His other arm clutched a pile of torn pages, falling free. His head was turned back, his eyes fastened on the destruction he fled.

Raphel's mother clicked her tongue again. Raphel opened his eyes in time to see her withdraw behind the wool hanging curtain. Her marriage bangles clicked on her wrists as she let the curtain fall, turning the room back to dimness. Fully awake, he noticed other morning sounds: the virile crowing of roosters challenging one another across the village, children shouting beyond the high slit windows in the haci's walls. Sunlight pierced into the room in tiny shafts, illuminating dust motes stirred by his mother's presence.

In the Pasho towers, he had woken each day with the dawn. His cell had faced east and filled early with the sterile light. He would wake and go to his window and stare into the bright dawn, letting it bathe him as it glinted across the mirror stillness of the thousand lakes. The sharp hard light reflected like mica splashes and turned the land molten as far as he could see, blinding him and obscuring green Keli's bridges.

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Soon after, his master would come to his door, a soft Keli man, fed well on the fish of Keli's lakes, his tattoos well set into the comfortable folds of his flesh. "Come desert Pasho," he would laugh. "Let us see what destruction Gawar's grandson has in store for us this morning. How many books will you tear through today?" To him, all men had been the same. Jai or Keli made no difference. Only study mattered.

"Raphel?" his mother whispered. "Pasho?" Her tongue clicked again from behind the curtain, a faint probing of his room's silence.

Raphel sat up slowly. "You don't need to call me 'Pasho,' Mother. I am still your son."

Her voice came back, muffled. "That may be. But your skin is covered with knowledge and everyone calls me Bia' Pasho."

"But I am the same."

His mother didn't answer.

Raphel kicked off his blankets and scratched at his dry skin. It was peeling in the aridity. He shivered. It had been cold in the night. He had forgotten that about the basin, that its nights, even in the dry season could be so cold. In Keli the nights were hot, even when the sun went down. Humid warmth saturated everything. Sometimes he would lie in his bed and think he could squeeze the air with his fists and warm water would run down his arms. He scratched again, wistful for the smooth suppleness of skin always caressed with liquid warmth. The air in the basin seemed to be an enemy, attacking him much as his grandfather had the day before.

Raphel began pulling his robes on, covering the sharp knifelike script of his attainment marks. It was an old language, more basic than the Jai, more direct in its impulses, less careful of offense, an impatient tongue, for lightning-quick, impulsive people. He began tying the stays of his robes, quickly hiding the learning hooks covering his body: The One Hundred Books, The Rituals of Arrival and Release, The Scientific Principles, The Rituals of Cleansing, Essentials of the Body, Bio Logic, The Rituals of Quaran, Chemic Knowledge, Plant and Animal Observation, Matica, Physical Matica, Principles of Construction, Earth Studies; Core Tech: Paper, Ink, Steel, Plastic, Plague, Production Line, Projectiles, Fertilizer, Soap . . . ten thousand chanted stanzas, interlinked and attached to symbol rhyme to aid their stability. Knowledge locked in verse from a time when books were hard to make and harder to protect, from a time when Pasho wandered like dandelion seeds between far-flung villages, holding up their palms in greeting to show the Open Eye and beg their free movement, dispensing their knowledge as far as their seed-pod minds could carry them, hoping to set down roots, and begin schools where they would seed new Pasho further afield.

"Raphel?"

His mother's voice broke his thoughts. Hurriedly, Raphel finished dressing and pushed the curtain aside.

His mother gasped. "Raphel! Your scarf!" She stumbled away from him desperate to keep Quaran.

Raphel ducked back into his room. He found his electrostatic scarf and wrapped it over his face. When he emerged again, his mother stood at

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the far side of their common room. She pointed at a cup of smoke tea sitting three meters from their hearth. Safe distance. Raphel skirted the hearth and squatted with his tea. A sweet bean porridge sat cooled beside it. The fire coals were already floating in a bucket of gray water, black and cold.

"How long have you been awake?" he asked.

"Hours. You slept late. You must have been tired."

Raphel sipped the cool smoke tea. "It's dark in the room. I'm used to the sun waking me."

His mother began sweeping the hard-packed floor with a straw broom, carefully avoiding coming too close. Raphel watched her cleaning process. Nine more days of ritual isolation.

When his grandfather had burned Keli, he and his army had camped at the village edge to keep Quaran. They had sung songs of blood and fire across the intervening distance, but did not enter the village until Quaran had passed. The Jai kept to the old ways. It had been absurd for him to think the old man would welcome him with open arms.

His mother swept dust out the door, then turned. Her tongue clicked uncertainly. Finally she said, "There is a girl I would like you to meet. She's from a very good family."

Raphel smiled and sipped his tea. "Already seeking a match?"

"The girl is visiting Bia' Hardez. Her aunt. She's a good Jai girl."

"What point is there? I won't complete Quaran for more than a week."

"Mala is returning to her family at Kettle Rock. If you wanted to see her you would have to go there, and then still pass Quaran in a foreign village. Mala is willing. You will meet outside, with clean sunlight between you."

Raphel stifled a teasing smile. "You turn from the old ways?"

"There is no harm meeting in clean sunlight. She does not fear you. You traveled from Keli. If you are not dead now, you never will be."

"Grandfather would disapprove."

"An untrampled scorpion troubles no one."

"And you were always such a proper Jai lady."

His mother clicked her tongue. "My hook knife is still sharp." She nodded at his finished tea. "Throw your cup away, and make sure it breaks in clean sunlight. No one can use it now."

A stone cannot be a pillow, the Keli cannot be friends.
—Jai Proverb. Recorded CS 1404, Pasho Eduard. (Recovered Document, Dry Basin Circuit, XI 333)

Five days into Quaran, Raphel met his potential match on the edge of the village, separated by two meters of sterile light. The black ringlets of Mala's hair shimmered in the bright sun and her eyes were deepened by the black lines of an eye pigment that Keli girls favored. Mala's skirt and blouse were of the old Jai patterns, black and red interwoven diamonds, shot through with gold threads. Her arms were bare of bangles, inviting a man to marry her and swathe her in blue.

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Within sight, but out of earshot, Raphel's mother and Bia' Hardez sat on the yellow plain, a pair of blue billowing matrons. Their gold bangles glittered sharply in the sunlight. In the distance, the old city stood silent, black bones against the sky. Raphel remembered exploring the city's tangled ruins where hawks roosted and coyotes trotted arrogantly down streets twice the width of Keli's greatest avenues. He remembered gathering spent shells from the mangled city, hunting for prizes from the vicious protracted wars that had destroyed the place.

Wind gusted. The chaperoning women tucked their blue skirts tighter around them. Mala pulled away her electrostatic scarf. Raphel noticed it was from Keli. The solar pack was distinctly from beyond the mountains, though with a Jai pattern to its weave. He pushed the thought away and studied the smooth lines of the girl's brown skin. She was like a bird, her face thin and graceful. Her cheekbones were sharp, but she was beautiful. At her questioning eyes, he pulled away his own scarf. They studied each other.

Finally she said, "You're much more handsome than in your pictures. Even with all those tattoos."

"You expected worse?"

Mala laughed. She pushed her windblown hair back from her face, showing the knife curve of her throat and jaw. "I thought you might have aged. You're young to be a Pasho. I thought my aunt exaggerated."

Raphel glanced back at the pair of women in married blue, gossiping and watching with speculative eyes for signs of a match. "No. Bia' Hardez is honest about those things. She matched my cousin."

"I've never seen a young Pasho."

"My teachers were dedicated."

"How long were you in Keli?"

"Ten years."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't have lasted a week. All that water. My grandfather told me it rained for months there."

"It's very pretty. When the rain touches the lakes, it makes rings, thousands and thousands of ring ripples all across them. You can stand on the marble bridges there and the rain can be as gentle as feathers."

The girl turned her eyes toward the old city. "I could never have lived in the rain." Her eyes remained fixed on the blackened ruins. "They say the Keli people shake hands. With strangers even. And they eat fish."

Raphel nodded. "It's true. I've seen it."

She wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. "Disgusting. Bia' Hardez told me that your grandfather would as soon kill you as have you return."

Raphel shrugged. "He is traditional. He doesn't like that I went to Keli."

"Most families would welcome a Pasho back into their family."

"You've heard of my grandfather."

"Oh yes. One of mine died in Keli on his crusade. When they burned the city."

Raphel thought of the chips in Milliner's statue, and wondered if her grandfather had been one of the hook hands who failed to topple it. Or if he had raged through the Pasho libraries, burning and killing and setting

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the severed heads of delivered Pasho beside the busts of Plato and Einstein. He pushed the thought away. "Do they sing songs for him in Kettle Rock?"

"Of course. He is remembered well."

"That's good."

Mala turned back to him, her dark accented eyes evaluating. "My aunt thinks a Pasho would be a good match for me." She stopped and pushed her hair back. She looked again toward the ruined city in the distance, then back at him. She gave a little shrug.

Finally Raphel said, "But you think differently."

"A husband should be from your native place."

"The basin is still my home."

"But your grandfather disowns you. My family is traditional."

"Your aunt sees no difficulty."

"She doesn't live in Kettle Rock. I have to face my family." She shook her head, studying him. "There is something not right about you. Something not Jai."

Raphel scowled. "And what is that, do you think?"

She cocked her head, examining him. "Too difficult to say. Maybe it's the taint of Keli in you. Maybe some water rose has captured your heart, some girl with a black braid and a silver belt around her hips. Those Keli girls are soft, I've heard. Not like Jai. Not like desert girls. We are hawks. They are little sparrows." She laughed. "No. I don't think you are the man for me. I am a traditional girl."

Raphel laughed. "You think you are traditional? You wear a Keli scarf and line your eyes like a Keli girl, and you still call yourself Jai?"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"I am Jai. My hook knife is sharp."

"So you say." She shook her head. "Go back to Keli, Raphel. Find a soft water girl who will love whatever desert bite you have left. Your grandfather is right. You don't belong here." She wrapped her scarf back across her face.

Raphel watched her walk away from him, her skirts molded across her hips as she swayed into the wind. For a moment he imagined following her but he forced himself to stand still. Pursuit would only lead to humiliation. He turned and strode away before the watching chaperones could see he had been discarded.

"The path of a Pasho is not one of simple reading. Knowledge is dangerous. We know this from the First Age, when people studied quickly quickly, like ants. We know this because there is so little left of what they constructed. Knowledge is always two-edged. For every benefit, there is hazard. For every good, evil. Carelessness and convenient solutions lead to chaos.

"It is not for a Pasho simply to gain knowledge, but to deserve knowledge. Our libraries are locked and the concepts inside are graded into levels of attainment. We do not keep this knowledge under lock and key because we crave power, as outsiders often accuse. We keep it because we fear it.

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"The process of becoming Pasho is not a process of study, but a process of wisdom. Milliner knew knowledge must spread again, but this time, it must spread without destruction accompanying it. Knowledge and technology are not things to be handed to any man who demands them. That path can only lead to disaster. We saw this in the First Age. We moved too quickly and were punished for it. This time we move slowly, slowly like the turtle and hope that there is no Second Cleansing."
—Pasho Cho Gan, CS 580. (Pasho Wisdom, Vol. XX)

"I went to be matched yesterday."

Old Gawar sat outside the door of his haci, surrounded by piles of red chilies, drying. The hot spice scent saturated the air, making Raphel cough. The old man smirked as he plucked dried chilies out of various piles, turned them speculatively between his gnarled fingers, then set them in his mortar and ground them into red dust before dumping the flakes into a clay urn. "So my grandson comes to see me again, does he?"

"What did you tell Bia' Hardez?"

The old man laughed. "Mala rejected you, did she?" He studied Raphel's angry face for an answer, then went back to grinding chilies, shaking his head and grinning. "Even your brainless mother should have known better than to arrange a meeting with that girl."

"You poisoned my name with her."

His grandfather laughed and crushed new chilies into dust. "Never." His vigorous movements sent up red powder clouds as he worked. "But I'm not surprised. Her grandfather fought with me. He died like a desert lion. We fought across Keli's bridges together. We stormed her towers. Mala would be too proud to take a fish-eater for a husband. I don't know what your mother was thinking. I'm brave, but I would never send my hook hands into an unwinnable battle." He dumped more finished chilies into the storage urn. "You should meet with the Renali family. They have a daughter."

"The ones who sell rice wine from Keli?" Raphel scowled. "You think too little of me."

The old man laughed. "Oh? My grandson is Jai after all?"

"I have never been anything else."

"Would you burn Keli?"

"We are not at war."

"War never ends. Even now they send their goods and people closer to us. Even good girls like Mala wear Keli scarves. How long before we are like the Kai, just another tribe who look and dress and talk like the Keli people? Wars such as this never end. If you want to prove you are Jai, you will help me wage war again, and put Keli in its place."

Raphel laughed. "What war can you wage?"

Old Gawar's eyes flicked up to Raphel, then back down to his grinding. A smile quirked at the corners of his mouth. "My hook knife is still sharp. Even now I counsel with the Basin villages. There are many who would war on Keli. If you are Jai, you will help us."

Raphel shook his head. "Pasho do not deal war. If you want to gather more water for the village, I can help. If you want to feed our children better, this too I can accomplish. What you ask, I cannot give."

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"Cannot? Or will not?" The old man studied Raphel, then smiled, showing worn yellowed teeth. "The all-seeing all-giving knowledge of the Pasho." He spat. "One hand open with an eye, the other behind the back with a noose. Look at the dirty Kai, well under the yoke of Keli now. They took your knowledge."

"They had no letters before us, nor basic hygiene. They were starving. Now they are fat and comfortable."

"And indistinguishable from Keli people. Pasho came and gave them letters and now they are not Kai." He spat again.

Raphel inclined his head. "You call my knowledge Keli knowledge, and yet, if we leave the knowledge for Keli alone, only then will you be right. If we use it for Jai purposes, then it is Jai. Knowledge knows no master. You complain about Keli electrostatics, but you won't use my knowledge."

"The Jai will not work in factories. We are not traders. We plant in the wet season. We war in the dry season. That is Jai."

"Then the Jai will pass into memory, and Keli will flourish."

The old man laughed. "No, Keli will burn, and we will write their epitaphs in the mud of that sweltering place. Already I send hook hands to the corners of the Basin. Thousands answer the call. Don't look so surprised. Keli encroaches too much. Their fat wheels, their scarves, their liquor and their transmitter stations invade on every side. If you are Jai, you will help us raze Keli once and for all."

"Pasho are neutral. We do not deal in war."

The old man waved a hand at Raphel in irritation. It was glazed red with the residue of dried chilies. "You think you don't deal in war? Just because blood doesn't flow down our alleys? Electrostatics and cosmetics from Keli one day, earbuds the next? Your Pasho gifts to Keli kill us day by day. Where does this end? With the Jai eating fish? This is certainly war, whatever you Pasho and your protégés claim." His black eyes turned hard as he stared up at Raphel. "If you are Jai, you will use that knowledge on your skin for Jai purposes, and you will make war."

Raphel frowned. "What knowledge do you want so badly, Grandfather? Something to leak radiation into Keli's lakes and fish, something to sicken their women and sterilize their men? A virus keyed to their climate? Something that will leave corpses on their water bridges, and nothing but wind on the thousand lakes?" Raphel waved his hand toward the edge of the village. "What does the old city tell us, if we seek so much destructive power? I sit five paces from you even now, thanks to ancient follies."

"Don't lecture me, boy. I learned the first one thousand stanzas myself."

"Before trying to destroy everything the Pasho built. A frustrated child, breaking clay because it wouldn't mold to his satisfaction."

"No! I would not mold to theirs! Their grand design is the death of the Jai. In a thousand years, will there be anything to distinguish us from Keli? Will our women wear silver belts, and theirs perhaps wear gold bangles on their wrists, and what then? What of the Jai?"

Raphel shook his head. "I cannot give what you ask for. A few knowledgeable men could sweep the planet clean of all that remains of us. We Pasho guide knowledge now. Our ancestors moved quickly, quickly, as impatient as ants. We move slowly now, with care. We understand that

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knowledge is simply a terrible ocean we must cross, and hope that wisdom lies on the other side. It is not some toy casually used for our pleasure."

Old Gawar made a face. "Elegantly spoken."

"Rhetoric. A Pasho must speak well, or die in distant lands."

"You speak well to cover black deeds. You let children die of the yellow sickness and men bleed dry from war wounds. We guess at knowledge you already possess. We know that you hold keys to a thousand locks, and that you part them out sparingly, according to Pasho design." The old man picked up a chili and dropped it into his mortar bowl. He picked up another and dropped it in with its cousin. "So sparingly."

He looked up at Raphel. "I don't want the knowledge the Pasho call appropriate. I want the Jai to survive. When the Keli are forgotten and the Kai are remembered as slaves, I want the Jai to write history. Jai drink mez. We wear gold not silver. We write dust epitaphs for our vanquished enemies and watch them blow away in the desert wind. This is what it is to be Jai. The Pasho would rub all this away and blend us into a toothless race of servants. I will not allow it. I tell you, grandson, Keli will burn. Best of all, it will burn because the Keli never managed to pry war knowledge from your selfish tattooed fists." The old man smiled thinly. "If nothing else, I must thank you Pasho for your neutrality. It serves me nearly as well. Go back to Keli, Grandson. Tell them Gawar Ka' Korum is coming again."

"A Pasho must always be respectful on his circuit. It is natural for a people to resist the presence and ideas of an outsider. In all cases, patience and subtlety are the Pasho's best tools. Our work is already generations long, and will be many more generations before it is complete. There is no hurry. Speed is what brought our ancestors to ruin. We guess, we move slowly, we wait. If we are not welcomed in a new place, we must pass on and wait for invitation. If we meet challenges, we must bend before them. Knowledge and influence are fragile things. Our reputation for neutrality, morality, and humanity must take the place of steel and sonics. Men make war. Pasho never."

—Pasho Nalina Desai, CS 955. (Lecture 121: On Circuit Travel Etiquette)

On the ninth day of Raphel's return, the rains came. Thick gray clouds banked on the horizon, building until they filled the southern sky. They came across the basin, their bellies heavy with water. Slowly they opened and the gray paint of falling water streaked the air. The yellow plains darkened as the sun disappeared behind the onrushing clouds. Dust puffed where fat rain drops struck. Minutes later, dust turned to mud as water thundered out of the sky. By the tenth day of Raphel's Quaran, a fine bright sheen of grass, nearly phosphorescent in its new life, covered the yellow plains outside the village as the rains continued to pour down.

In the family haci, Raphel's mother worked at a celebratory feast made doubly joyful by the rain's arrival. Bowls of spiced mutton, cool yogurt, and thick red bean soup propagated around the hearth. She smiled at the rain, stirred pots over the fire and didn't complain that the wood gath-

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ered from the far hills had been dampened by the sudden rush of water. She reached out to touch Raphel often, a nearly superstitious movement that she repeated again and again, assuring herself that her son once again truly stood within her home.

In the afternoon, she sent him to fetch his grandfather. She sent him with an umbrella bought from a Keli trader, a big black thing. When Raphel protested that he didn't mind the rain, she clicked her tongue and sent him out anyway, saying that if anyone knew how to make an umbrella it should be the Keli and there was no shame in using it.

Raphel made his way through the village, dodging flooding alleys and the curtains of rain that poured off the haci roofs. Lightning flickered high above. Thunder rolled distantly. A young girl in black and red dashed down the alley toward him, smiling at his bare face, now unhidden by an electrostatic mask. His umbrella protected him from much of the dumping rain, but the girl was soaked, and clearly didn't care. Raphel turned to watch as she deliberately jumped into puddles and yellow flows, splashing mud and water and laughing at the wet.

His grandfather's courtyard was empty, its red chilies removed indoors. Raphel stood dripping outside.

"Grandfather?"

The rasping voice was surprised. "You're still here?"

Raphel pulled aside the curtain and slipped inside. He carefully shook his umbrella outside the door, and left it leaning there. His grandfather sat beside the hearth, working on another hook knife. Several lay around his feet, all of them gleaming with oil and sharpening.

"Bia' wants you to come for dinner."

The old man snorted. "She won't live in my haci but she invites me for dinner." He looked up and studied Raphel's uncovered face. "You've completed Quaran, then?"

"Today."

"You return and the land turns green. Auspicious. And you haven't left for Keli."

Raphel sighed. He sat on the hard-packed floor near his grandfather's feet. "I am Jai, Grandfather. Whatever you think, this is my home. I am here to stay."

"I suppose it's good to see your face. Despite your tattoos."

Raphel squeezed the wet hem of his robe. It was spattered with mud. Water ran out between his fingers. "I feel like I'm finally home." He looked outside to the gray curtain of water pouring off the haci's roof. "It amazes me that I ever hated the sound of rain. In Keli it rained all the time, and no one cared. Or else they hated it. I think it's the finest sound I've ever heard."

"You sound like a Jai. If you picked up your hook knife, I'd almost believe you belong."

Raphel shook his head and grinned. "Pasho are neutral, Grandfather."

The old man's laughter was mocking. He reached for his bottle of mez. "Drink with me then, Pasho."

Raphel climbed back to his feet. "This time, I will serve you. As I should have done the day I arrived."

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"And break Quaran? I think not."

Raphel took the bottle from his grandfather and set the clay cups on the ground. "You're right. We should observe the old ways. It's what distinguishes us from Keli people. We are true to our history." The long sleeves of his Pasho's robes dragged around the paired cups as he began pouring.

"Don't spill," his grandfather scolded.

Raphel smiled. He tucked his sleeves out of the way. "I'm not used to my robes, yet." He finished pouring the clear bright liquor into the paired cups. He capped the bottle carefully and handed a cup to his grandfather.

They held their cups to the sky, poured drops to their ancestors and drained them together. A moment later, Gawar's cup fell from his nerveless hand. It shattered. Clay fragments skittered across the hard-packed dirt. The old man's jaw locked. Air whistled between his clenched teeth as he fought to breathe. "Mez?" The word squeezed out.

Raphel ducked his head apologetically and pressed his palms together in farewell. "Undistilled. A common enough death for a Jai. You were right, Grandfather. War never ends. You taught the Pasho that. They have not forgotten. Even now you squat in their nightmares."

His grandfather grimaced and forced words out between his clenched teeth. "The Pasho side with Keli?"

Raphel shrugged apologetically. "Knowledge must be protected, Grandfather—" He broke off as his grandfather spasmed. Spittle leaked from the corner of the old man's mouth. Raphel leaned close and used the sleeve of his white robe to wipe the shaking man's drool. "I'm sorry, Grandfather. The Keli are too soft to withstand a Jai crusade. You would have slaughtered them like goats and turned all the Pasho work to ash: Keli's libraries, its hospitals, its factories. We Pasho cannot afford an open war; mez seemed the best alternative."

His grandfather's eyes were wide, stunned. He grunted, trying to form words. Raphel held the old man's hand as another spasm swept through him. The old man strained. Raphel leaned close to hear his whisper.

"You betray us all."

Raphel shook his head. "No, Grandfather, only you. Knowledge is a Jai birthright as much as Keli's. Your bloody crusade would have left ashes for our children. Now, instead of war, I will teach our people to sink water veins and help them plant crops that weather the hottest days of dry season, and we will flourish. Never fear, Grandfather, I am still Jai, whatever you think of my Pasho's tattoos. Your hook knife has dulled, but mine is still sharp."

Old Gawar's body stilled. His head lolled. Raphel wiped the death froth from his grandfather's mouth, the last residue of his passing. Outside, rain fell steadily, softening the air and soaking the thirsty ground with the life-giving water of the wet season. ○

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CURSE OF THE DRYAD'S HUSBAND

She might as well
live in the backyard
beneath the spreading
branches of the oak.

Each night he returns
to an empty house
and a cold kitchen
to find her tending
her organic garden,
or merely sitting
under that damn tree,
communing with the
birds and flowers,
even the yellowjackets
and tomato moths.

The only food she
serves him must be
not only vegetarian
but Zen macrobiotic;
if he sees one more
helping of sprouts
rising up on his plate
like a tiny alien forest,
he may start to scream.

Then he will go downtown
to Jensen's hardware
and put down his card
to buy the shiny band saw
he has already coveted.

Despite its spreading
limbs and delicious shade,
it is quite an old tree,
nearly half dead already.
It will not take long.

—Bruce Boston

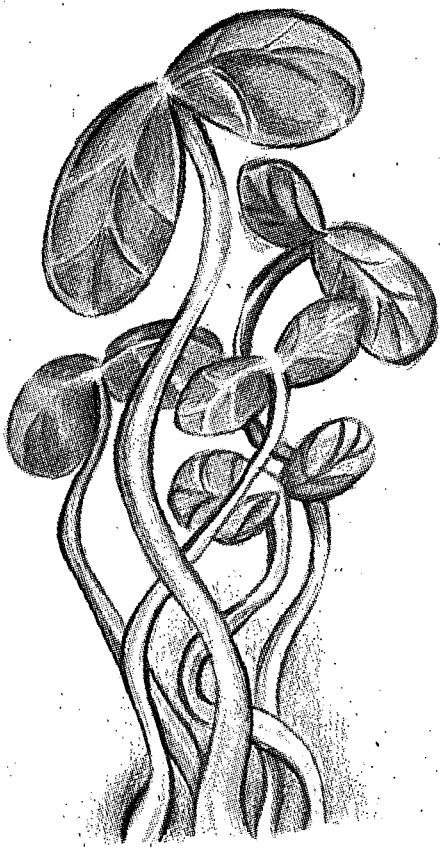

Illustration by June Levine

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THE BIOGRAPHY OF A BOUNCING BOY TERROR!

Part One: Crime Commences

Y.S. Wilce

Y.S. Wilce is a graduate of Clarion West 2002 who tells us that she is a "military historian by training, fabulist by inclination, and Westerner at heart." Ms. Wilce is working on a novel that takes place in the same milieu as the following story. Readers can learn more about her work at the author's website: *www.yswilce.com.*

Once upon a time, my little waffles, far across the pale eastern sands, a baby boy bounced from his mother's womb into a dark and dangerous world, into a land well full of hardship, turmoil, and empty handball courts. This boy, starting tiny and growing huge, would one day become a legend in the minds of his minions, a hero in the hearts of his hobbledehoys, the fanciest lad of them all: Springheel Jack!

And this, my dovetails, is the story of how it the bouncing began.

Now in the beginning, young Jack was not a rowdy tyke, well full of the jiggamaree and the falder-a-oo. The other childer might drive their mammas mad with fancy ideas of fun, but young Jack was not made for sportive tricks. He was his mamma's muffin and he kept to her side, helping in the smelly sport of making matches, which phosphoric occupation was how the family kept fed. They were a poor household, with no extra

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divas for white sugar or white bread, and all ten of Jack's tiny brothers and sisters must put paws into keeping the darkness of poverty at bay. Dipping lucifers at ten glories a decade leaves little room for boisterous fun.

Well-dingy was the rundown tenement in which Jack's family lived, perched atop a noisome blind tiger from which issued rousting and revelry all hours of the night—illegal whist games, bitter beer, and up-against-the-wall fiddling. Well-dingy was the rundown room into which Jack's family squeezed, tiny oil lamp the only tiny light, tiny window opening into tiny alley, and tiny pinch-faced siblings with cold blue fingers dipping matchsticks into glowing blue poison. Instead of a cat, the family kept Hunger, which crouched in the corner of the tiny room, wiggling its tail and licking its prickly chops, waiting, waiting. They had each other, but they had nothing else, not even shoes to cover their frigid toes. Their days were poisonous and dreary.

But at night, dear doorknobs, when the dipping was done and the little pots of phosphorus illumined the shadows, Jack lay in his nest of rags, tucked up against his baby mice siblings and he dreamed away the pallid gray world: the knobby fingers, the tightening tummies, each drab day dribbling into another drab day, endlessly endless. At night, Jack dreamed of colors: glimmering, glittering, glistening, glowing colors—cyan, jade, celadon, amber, cobalt, wheat, orange, plum, lavender, and magenta. But the color that shone the most through Jacko's dreams was the brilliant tang of red: cerise, sangyn, vermilion, carmine, crimson, gules, rust, rose, cochineal. Rushing friendly warm red, delicious and hot.

Well, my nifty needles, once a week Jack's mamma would take the little boxes of matches and place them into her market basket for to redeem. The other childer stayed home, under the concern of Jack, but the baby who coughed went with mamma, wrapped in newspaper and tucked also into the basket, sleeping uneasily among the boxes of spark. At the factory of Zebulon Quarrel & Dau., Manufacturers of Lucifers, Phosphates, & Triggers, Jack's mamma would turn in the week's hundred boxes and receive into her thin hand one dull gold diva and eleven dingy glories, and on this happy day, there would be moldy cheese and squashed kale pie for supper.

But one day, Jack's mamma could carry neither basket nor baby. The sickly prickles were itching through the City, and, like all Disease, they enjoyed the poorest people first, leaving the rich for a luscious fat dessert. In Jack's mamma's illness, it fell to her muffin to do her duty, else gobbling Hunger would creep from its corner and snatch the childer up, one by one. So, leaving the basket for the baby who coughed, Jack packed the boxes of matches in a crumpled cracker box and set out down the splashy wet streets to Zebulon Quarrel's crenellated factory.

Through the sloppy streets he sloshed, brave Jackling, clutching his cracker box from the splashing dillys, the clippy horsecars, and the pushing people who were eager to get home to their toasted cheese dinners and hot tea before darkfall. At the hulking behemoth gates of Quarrel's factory, wee Jack stood upon the iron shoe scraper and handed his cracker box upward to the grimacing factotum behind the window rail. Handed

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down he was, after a few minutes of stolid counting, the munificent sum of one dull faced diva and eleven chipped glories. A fortune in coin.

Thus paid, Jacko slogged to the 99 Glory Tuckshop, where to buy squashed pie and moldy cheese, and perhaps even a crock of spinach paste for the hungry childer's evening sup. Full darkness lingered in the wings of the sky, waiting for its cue, and the graying rain drove down like needles, stitching the evening in silvery sorrow. The streets were most empty and wet now, and only sweet Jacko, with his blue bare feet and his ragged sweater, hopped through the puddles, shivering.

Then—Jack paused.

Then—Jack poised.

Then—Jack stood staring into a glowing window front by which he had just been hurrying, and there he saw a thing that caught in his head like happy, stuck in his sight like sugar, a vision that near tore his breath away. A vision that seemed sprung from his most secret special dreams.

A pair of red sparkly boots.

And *what* boots—heels as high as heaven and toes as sharp as salt! Gleaming stove pipe uppers greaving tall and slick, and on the tip of each pointy toe a snake's head leered, spitting tongue and bone-sharp teeth.

And what sparkle—glistening and glittering in the evening light like diamond rain after the shower has stopped, like snow in the sun, like a thousand stars clustered in the midnight sky.

And what *red*—slick wet red, sparking like sunshine, thick and rich as paint, gleaming like a pricked finger, like a stormy dawn, like first love.

Jacko opened the door and inside he went. The shop contained a vast smoky gloom from which sprang the vague hulk of cabinets and large pieces of carved wood whose shapes Jack could neither see fully nor understand. He cared not for the shadows or the smoke; he cared only for the brilliant boots in the window.

"Do you see love?" A squeaky voice inquired from the distant reaches of the room.

"Those red sparkly boots in the window—" stuttered Jack, overcome by fog and fright. A jackdaw flapped out of the shadows, perched upon a hat rack, and regarded our boy with flat button eyes.

"A most discerning young dasher," said the grammer who leapt from the back of the store with a flash of blue petticoats and took up stand beside him, gripping his arm with a grandmotherly pinch. In the gloam, her teeth shone as green as grass, and her ancient monkey head was surmounted by a soufflé of a cap. "Best in the house. Chop-chop, my little darlings, and come to your bungalow baby boy!"

The boots jumped out of their window, driven by their own joie-de-vie, and began to caper nimbly on the counter top, heels clacking a fandango, tongues flapping a jaunty tune. The jackdaw cawed accompaniment, and even the old grammer snapped gnarled fingers as the heels clicked and spun, snapping upward, diddling downward, the snake heads gnashing their needley teeth and spitting. Jack's blue toes began to tap the splintery floor and his heart jiggled and jumped in his chest. Never before had he seen such a glorious slick shade of red, and now he was completely caught.

"The boots like your sweetness," said the grammer, and both she and

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the jackdaw giggled. "For a small price, they shall be your daisies and together such fun you shall have."

Jack's jiggly heart flopped. What funds did he have to purchase anything other than moldy cheese and squashed kale pie? What funds would he ever *get,* in his dull little room, dipping poison matches for plungers to light their cigars from? And the hungry childer and the sick mamma waiting at home for his return. His world would be forever dull, all else was a forlorn hope. Jack's wiggly heart died and he began to turn away.

"Cheap at the price, but dear in the taking," the grammer said. "And naught price that you cannot pay, I warrant."

"I have no flash," Jacko said, his sad exit halted. But his fingers felt the twist of his sweater wherein he had carefully placed the coins, rubbing their rounded shapes through the thin cloth.

The jackdaw spoke up then, its voice a buzz of suggestion. "What then burns in your hand, Jackanapes?"

Jack looked down to the sudden heat in his grubby paw, and there lay the coins, not so dull now. The diva gleamed like the sun, with eleven little tiny silver moons circling its golden glow.

"But—"

The boots clicked their crimson heels together and the snake heads said, in slithery tandem voices: *Darling Burning Boy, with us you shall be the Fleet Footed Fancy Lad, the Red-Haired Child of Sunset. No obstacle you cannot leap, no hunger you cannot fill, no thirst you cannot quench. Come and let us jump for joy!*

Looking at the red sparkly boots, the color of his dreams, what could Jack think of hungry tummies in the tenement home, waiting for their crusty sup? What could he think of a sick mamma and a skull-headed baby, coughing instead of cooing? What could he think other than the glorious tap-dancing of the slap-happy boots, the rich radiant red that filled his heart with warmth, flooded his brain with fun, and made his toes tap? Oh, our Jack was a good boy, and perhaps for a tiny momento he *did* consider the cold little faces, the grinning Hunger waiting patiently in the corner, his mamma's red swollen hands, but then the boots drummed a furious rhythm, and, in that rhythm, all else Jack forgot.

When all your life you have been cold, little inkwells, how can you then resist the fire?

The grammer took the diva and eleven glories and dropped them into the gaping maw of the jackdaw, which flapped off into the dark shadows, still cackling. Then the knobby old lady flicked her hankie at Jacko, who jerked at the waft of hyacinth that washed over him. He coughed, and, as he coughed, she flicked again, speaking a strange word that crackled and snapped in the air, sparking, arcing.

Jack shut his peeps to the brilliant flicker, and when he opened them full-wide again, the grammer was gone, the darkness was gone, the shop was gone, and he stood, light-footed, in the center of the street. Rosy daylight suffused the air, pooling pinkly on the surface of the puddles and the wet walls of the surrounding buildings. He looked down, and the snakes hissed happily, little tongues tasting the clean morning air. Then his boots took to the sky like big red balloons, carrying him upward on their flight. The boots

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capered, they danced, they trotted, they gavotted, and they leapt full fifty feet in the air, tongues clacking with joy, Jack shouting with joy, as they flew.

Over the bright morning roofs, they sprang, Jack and his Jackboots, traipsing across treetops. They jumped over the milk cart, and the trash cart, and little lines of childer trailing off to school. They scattered traffic brass and barouches, flyers and flowerbeds, leaping ever higher into the sterling blue sky. Never before had Jack felt so lovely, so wise, so tall, and so very very clever, and, in his happiness, he yodeled a little tune, full of hope and wonderment. The red sparkly boots were just the thing, and now that he had them, he could not imagine his feet, his heart, his life, without them. The world was fresh and new, and Jack with it, all dewdrop eager-eyed, truly footloose and fancy free.

But after a time, Jack grew tired of the jumping and wanted to rest. He watched the cool green grass bounce by his springs, and yet, when he tried to halt so to rest under the shade trees, the sparkly red boots kept bouncing him along. He grabbed at railings as he passed, sweaty hands sliding from the iron; he was flying so fast now that it seemed perhaps the Wide World itself was moving and he was the one standing still. Jacko shouted for help—to the brass directing traffic, to the washwoman kneeling on marble steps, to the costermonger polishing her apples—but his shouts wisped in the wind and were lost. Still he bounced on, going ever higher and higher with each leap, until his ears rang and his head spun, and he was fair ill with dizziness. He snatched at chimney pots and street lights, at lightning vanes and flag-pole finials, but still he sprang onward.

Then, suddenly, he stopped.

Jackie stopped and he tumbled, down into the dust and lay there, thankful that the bouncing had ceased, although his head still seemed to leap and spin, spin and leap. His tum twisted and turned but was too empty to urp.

"Well, now, little leaper," a voice said, "How far can you go before you kiss the sun and burn your roly poly red lips?"

Jack squinted up, but only a shadow could he see, bright sun burning behind a darkened head.

"I cry sorrow," said Jacko, "And offer thanks. The boots fair well skint me."

"So I see," said the friendly voice. "Perhaps you'd like me to help you take them off?"

"Ayah so," agreed Jack, whose tender tootsies, not yet used to encompassing leather, were now painfully raw. But no amount of pulling would remove the sparkly red boots from Jack's wee feeties, and while you, clever tulips, are probably not surprised by this turn of the ankle yourselves, it came as a huge and utter gasp to our poor little Jackomydarling.

"You have bought a bargain," said the gramper, for tugging and pulling had revealed him to be so. "And keep it you shall. The boots are tired now and need to rest, but once they have had their kip, you'll be bouncing again."

"But bouncing be done!" cried Jack. Now that the fun was resting, he was suddenly recalling the hungry siblings, the sick mamma, the coughing baby, all waiting for him to return with their chow. But now he had no money and no chow, nothing but sparkly red boots which soared and galloped but which could not keep Hunger at bay. "I must slip the boots and return for my flash, for the coins I need to buy munch for my dear loves at home."

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The gramper smiled, and shook his stick. A jackdaw flapped down and perched upon his shoulder, gazing at young Jacko with flat black eyes. "The shop is closed and the shopkeeper gone. What is bought cannot be returned."

"But my lovely lollies? My sweet mamma and my tiny siblings? The baby who coughs? Can they live? Must they die for my sparklies?" Tears began to stir in Jack's eyes and all his joy in red was gone.

"Perhaps this consideration should have come *before* the purchasing," the gramper said; "But such is the rashness of youth. You say you are fair well skint, of both flash and dash—maybe so."

From its perch upon the gramper's shoulder, the jackdaw spoke up then, its voice a burr of suggestion: "What then burns in your hand, Jacko-lantern?"

Jack looked down to the sudden coldness in his grubby paw, and there, caught in his fingers, gleamed a strand of pearls, tiny white moons strung on a golden cord. Never had he seen anything so round and pure, and yet how had it come to be in his hand? In his soaring, he must have snatched and noticed not.

"Did you not look before you leapt? Or while leaping look?" The stick was shook again, and pointed upward, toward an open window and a fluttering drape. "Doors are lock'd, but who could imagine that larceny might leap on springy heels?"

The jackdaw opened his wings in a great flutter, launching upward with a hoarse cry, and when Jack lowered his shielding arm, the gramper and his fetch were gone. But the pearls remained, cool and knobby, and so too did the open window. Jack looked from one to the other, considering, and a rough red magick began to burn in his brain. He stood and tapped one red sparkly heel upon the grass. The snake-head spit, and with the tamp Jack felt vigor anew course upward through his tender tootsies, his knobby knees, his empty tum, his sad heart. When he stamped again, this time with both heels, upward he soared, like an arrow, to the beckoning window.

When Jack bounced home to his family's tenement room, laden down was he with gifts bestowed upon him by his bouncing boots and many open windows. With high springy heels and unlocked doors, roofs, and balconies, the whole city was his huckleberry.

The tiny siblings greeted his arrival with weak squeals of joy, for instead of squashy kale pie, Jacko brought spicy chicken galantine, savory and strong. Instead of moldy cheese, there was cherry cream custard for afters and never more that sticky gritty spinach paste. The sick mamma and the baby who coughed got a spoonful of Madam Twanky's Super Celebrated Celery Salt Med-I-Cine, which fixed them both right up. After much munching, Jack chucked the horrible match pots out of the window, and the entire family removed to the Palace Union Hotel, where they reveled in lush carpets, hot water, and toast on demand. Hunger, left behind in the empty tenement room, slunk sadly down the street, looking for a new corner to call home.

And thus, darling dishrags, did wee Jacko take to a life of snuggery and sin, poaching purses, fixing races, mashing lovers, cutting cards. Thus was Springheel Jack born, the Bounciest Boy Terror ever to be seen. The reign of the Boots had begun! ❍

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SLEEPING DRAGONS

Lynette Aspey

Lynette Aspey is an Australian with itchy feet, whose life reads a little like a travelog. She's lived in Britain, Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, and various places inbetween. Home is now a little yacht currently moored in Trinidad. "Sleeping Dragons" is her first sale to *Asimov's.*

When I was a little girl, I thought that all babies hatched from golden eggs. I don't mean that Ryan's egg was made of real gold. Rather, it was like a smooth rock the color of beach sand at sunset, and when Dad put it into my arms, my skin tingled. That it would hatch, after all the care I lavished on it, seemed perfectly natural to me, although Dad was surprised. He had brought it back for me from Vietnam as a gift, and it was *supposed* to be a dragon's egg.

The first sign we had that something might be happening was when fine veins appeared in that smooth, hard surface and it started to leak. Soon after, I was disappointed to find myself with an infant brother instead of a baby dragon, but Ryan was hard to resist. When he smiled, he looked just like a chubby Buddha, with soft black hair and honey-colored skin.

One day, Dad warned, someone might come to take him away, but until then, he was our secret. It was an easy one to keep, living as we did a long way from anywhere, even by Australian standards.

I was seven years old, and Ryan nearly two, when the old man came. I remember being cross because Ryan had plonked his fat bottom into the middle of my play, sitting on my paper and chewing my crayons.

The afternoon sun was too strong for the old curtains to keep out, but I enjoyed playing on the carpet amidst the patchwork sunlight. There was the hum of insects and the squawk of birds in the eucalyptus trees outside. From my father's study, I could hear the tap-tap-tip of his keyboard.

As usual, Yellow Dog lay stretched across the entrance to the hallway, from where he could keep an eye on us all.

"'Ainie," said Ryan, levering himself up the way toddlers do. "Knock. Knock."

I didn't bother looking up. "Who's there?" Usually it was Dog, or Dad, or

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Dino the dinosaur, but instead of playing, Ryan trotted out of the living room, into the kitchen. When he had nearly reached the door, Yellow Dog rose up on stiff legs to follow. I could see them from where I sat; the little boy with his hand on the back of the old dog, looking out. A moment later, Yellow Dog started barking.

Then came the scrunching sound of boots, and a shadow appeared at the door.

"Daddy?" I called, but he was already there, standing with one hand on the wall, the other on his heart. He paused for only a beat, before a few long strides took him across the kitchen. He scooped the baby up and hugged him close. Yellow Dog's hackles were bristling.

I got up and sidled closer. The shadow at the door resolved into a man-shape as I approached, the outline blurred by the dirty gray of the fly screen and the bright sunshine behind. I could see that the stranger was shorter than my father, but I had the peculiar impression that he was also much *bigger*. It was his shadow, I thought, noticing how it reached across the room. It fell over the dog and my father, and I was afraid to come any closer in case it touched me too.

The stranger was staring at Ryan. "Bắc Vuóng," he whispered. *King.*

"Chủa Bắc." *Honored Grandfather*. My father's voice was shaking. "Bắc cần gí?" *What do you want?*

"Your Vietnamese is still terrible, Jon Ashton," said the shadow man. At the sound of his voice, Yellow Dog's hackles settled, as if a hand had stroked them down.

Ryan burbled from his perch on Dad's hip. I think a cloud must have passed over the sun then, for the bright light suddenly faded and the stranger resolved into nothing more threatening than a sturdy old bloke with neat grey hair, bushy eyebrows, and eyes like shiny black pebbles in a nest of wrinkles. "We must talk," he said.

I remember thinking that Dad was acting very strangely. He turned and saw me standing in the corner, where the carpet became linoleum, the demarcation between our living room and the kitchen. He brought Ryan over to me and wrapped my arms around him.

"Don't come outside, Elaine," he said. Then, to the dog, he commanded, "Stay." Yellow Dog sat back on his haunches, ears pricked. Dad stroked the dog's wide, smooth head, slipped his hand under his muzzle and lifted his head up so that they looked eye to eye. "Guard," he said, and then he went outside, shutting the fly-screen door firmly behind him.

Yellow Dog padded over to the door and lay down beside it. The crafty animal knew me far too well. I gave a few good tugs on his collar anyway, just for good measure, before Ryan and I lay down across his tummy so that we could watch and listen through the screen door. I was delighted to see the baby's merciless little fingers grabbing a handful of thick fur.

Yellow Dog, aware of the price to pay for his obedience, gave a huff of discomfort, settled his muzzle onto his paws and waited for Dad to come back and relieve him from duty.

I could only hear snippets of their conversation. The two men were standing side by side; my tall, fair father and the stocky, dark stranger. Dad murmured something and passed his hands over his eyes, as he

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sometimes did when he was very tired or sad. He kicked at the ground with his boot, sending up little clouds of red dust.

A wide firebreak of bare earth surrounded our house, and, beyond that, nothing but bush; scrubby saplings and tall ghost gums, their skin of bark peeling away to reveal smooth, silver trunks. The afternoon breeze was heavy with the smell of eucalypt.

"He is too vulnerable here," I heard the old man say.

Dad muttered something, shoved his hands into his pockets.

The stranger laughed out loud. "Hide him? And if you could, what do you think he will become in that time?" He gestured toward the house. "You cannot protect them both."

From somewhere close by, a kurrajong warbled, and another joined in chorus. I breathed in the tangy bush smell. The *whumpf whumpf* of Yellow Dog's panting was loud in my ears.

Dad's voice was a low, angry hum.

The old man shook his head, and it appeared to me that dust motes danced around his shoulders. Dad's hands came out of his pockets and clenched into fists and his voice rose. "You think I'm going to give him up? Just like that?"

"It is a mistake to think of him as your son."

I glanced down at Ryan. He had stopped torturing Yellow Dog, his attention captured by the old man. I wondered if he knew they were talking about him.

"I have guarded his secret all my life, as my ancestors have done for thousands of years. His destiny is not with you."

"The egg came to me legitimately," said Dad, sounding desperate.

"And my daughter will pay the price of her betrayal. Oh yes. In the meantime, where is the proof that this child is yours, eh?"

Dad started to say something else, but the old man held up his hand. "I do not blame you for what happened and I do not threaten lightly. It is my duty. I *must* take him back."

Dad put his hands back in his pockets. I caught the words: "not now, so sudden, let me."

The old man was quiet for a while, then he nodded. He looked back at us and waved, as if he was the nicest person in the world, before walking off down the rough dirt road and quickly disappearing amidst the ghost gums.

Dad hardly spoke for the rest of the evening, and I knew that look on his face well enough not to pester him. After he had put us to bed, I heard the creak of the veranda's old wooden floor at the back of the house and the slap of the screen door.

I got up and went to my window, but I couldn't see anything, so I padded out to the veranda, stepping carefully in the dark, knowing which floorboards would not complain. The night breeze was cool and pleasant. I pressed my nose against the fly screen, careful not to breathe in too deeply in case the dust made me sneeze.

He was standing in the yard, naked, head thrown back and long brown arms wrapped around his pale chest. I could see his shoulders and the

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muscles down his back all bunched and bulging. He was looking up at the stars, and he was crying.

I stepped backward, sorry for having spied on him, and my foot came down on the wrong floorboard. It betrayed me with a loud *creak*.

Dad turned toward me, although I don't think he could see me in the dark, and there was so much pain in his face that I was sure I had done something terrible.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"What are you doing out of bed?"

I said the first thing that came to mind. "You didn't tell us a story." Which was true enough.

"Go to bed, Elaine."

"But, Daddy," I whined.

"Now!"

I fled back to the bedroom and dived under my blankets, burrowing as deep as I could. I counted the long minutes before I heard the footsteps outside my door and breathed a sigh of relief.

The bed tilted down as he sat next to me. He gently pulled the covers from over my head, and tucked them around my shoulders.

Dad had put on his dressing gown. He toyed with the frayed edge of its belt while looking at the crib, where Ryan slept. "I do have a story," he said.

I snuggled up against his knee and he absently re-tucked the edge of my blanket. "A long time ago, there was a man called Kinh Duong, and he was the ruler of the Land of Red Demons. Kinh Duong fell in love with the daughter of the Dragon Lord of the Sea, and they had a son, whom they named Lac Long Quan. In time, Lac Long Quan grew up to become the Dragon Lord of Lac, and he ruled the land of the Red River delta. One day, Ti Lung, the Earth Dragon, warned him that there would be trouble with the people in the north unless he found a wife from those lands to keep the peace. After a long search, Lac Long Quan met a beautiful woman called Au Co."

"That's a funny name," I said.

"And you think 'Elaine' wouldn't sound strange to her?" he asked. "Do you want this story or not?" I nodded enthusiastically. "Okay, then. Au Co had already lived for a long time, and some even believed that she was immortal. Even so, she married Lac Long Quan and it seemed that they were happy, but then she did something strange."

At seven years old, I could imagine things very weird indeed, but Dad no longer seemed happy telling me this story. He looked down at his feet for a long time, absently picking at his dressing gown.

"Something strange?" I prompted.

Finally, he said, "The story goes that instead of babies, Au Co had a hundred eggs, from which were born a hundred sons."

My skin tingled with the memory of Ryan's egg.

"The Dragon Lord loved his wife," Dad continued after a pause, "but she didn't want to live in the lowlands, where he ruled. She craved the high places of the world. So, Au Co took fifty of her sons and went into the mountains, leaving Lac Long Quan and their other fifty sons in the delta lowlands."

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"She had another egg, didn't she?" I interrupted again. "Or maybe the last one didn't hatch."

"I don't know, 'Lainie," he said softly.

The baby stirred in his sleep. Chubby fingers opening and closing like caterpillars.

"You won't give Ryan to that old man, will you, Daddy?"

"His name is Mr. Pham," he said, standing up.

"But—"

"Enough!" Then, in a gentler voice, "Go to sleep."

He closed the door firmly behind him when he left the room. I turned over on my side and saw that the moon was just rising. Some of its pale light filtered through the sparse trees outside, and caught the bars of Ryan's crib, making a shadow bridge across the space between us.

The next day, we drove to Wallindah for supplies. Ryan sat in the middle of the front seat, strapped into his baby chair. He had a terry-toweling hat pulled down over his forehead to shade his eyes, one chubby fist gripping his beloved dinosaur. He was chuckling, happy to be going on a car ride. I was happy too, because I knew that he would fall asleep almost straight away, and it would be nice to have Dad all to myself.

I remembered to bring some cushions to sit on, so that I could see out the window, and so that the bouncing of Elsie, our ancient Land Rover, wouldn't make me bite my tongue.

Wallindah is a typical one-street town, with a hardware store, a bakery, and a general store that is also the post office. It has a gas station and a farm-equipment supplier and two pubs. A few cars and trucks were parked in the street, some with panting dogs lying underneath. There were only a few people moving around. It was the middle of the day, and sensible folk had retreated out of the heat into one or the other pub.

Dad parked in front of the general store and told me to stay in Elsie with Ryan. He made sure both of us had our water bottles and left my window wound down. The sun was behind us, but it was hot, and I was sure that my bottom was melting into the pile of cushions.

Dad opened the back door and Yellow Dog jumped out, happy to stretch his legs and find something to pee on.

Ryan woke up as soon as we stopped. I could tell, from the way his eyes followed Dad into the store, that he was preparing to yell up a storm. I knew just how he felt. Since it was going to happen anyway, I couldn't be accused of having started anything. I snatched away Dino and threw it out the window.

Ryan's dark eyes narrowed vengefully, even as his face crumpled into an agony of distress, and his little legs started kicking in fury. I felt a rush of joy at having triggered such a reaction, but the anticipated yells never came. Distracted by something outside, Ryan suddenly forgot his tantrum.

"Caw, caw," he said.

I turned, and there, looking in at us through the dusty windscreen, was a huge crow. It tilted its head to one side, studying us from a bright, black eye. Its beak was half-open, probably from the heat, but it seemed to me that it was smiling at us, or laughing.

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Ryan kicked again, bouncing his little body up and down against his restraints. "Caw. Caw."

I didn't like the bird. "Shoo!" I said, and lunged forward, wanting to scare it away. It hopped back a few paces, lifting its wings slightly, and then ruffled its feathers. It turned its head to one side and studied me, then hopped up to the windscreen and tapped its huge beak against the glass. Tap, tap, tip.

Elsie was old but well built, Dad said, and I knew that there was no reason to be afraid of a stupid bird when I sat behind solid, reassuring glass. I quickly wound up my window anyway.

Ryan leant forward in his chair, staring at the bird. He waved a chubby arm about as if he, too, wanted to shoo it away.

The crow watched him for a moment, and then bounced away on its skinny, leathery legs. Its claws click-clicked on the dirty metal of Elsie's hood. It jumped onto the metal frame of the bullbar, at the front of the car, turned around, jumped into the air and flew straight for us. BANG! It hit the glass in a fury of exploding black feathers, beak, and claws.

I screamed and threw myself over Ryan, but he didn't even whimper. When I looked into his eyes, they were as black and round as those of the bird. I scrabbled for the door handle, suddenly desperate to get out of the car. Behind me, Ryan cooed, "Da, Da."

There was Dad, with Dino in his hand, staring at the bloody smear on our windscreen and the crumple of black feathers on the hood. He looked down at me from beneath the wide brim of his hat, and we connected in a moment of instant understanding.

Run away, I thought. We have to run away.

He put the shopping in the back seat, letting the dog jump in, before going around to the front. He lifted the bird by a broken wing and dropped it on the ground. He jumped into the car, and, without a word, handed Ryan his toy, checked our restraints, then gunned Elsie's engine and drove out of town as fast as the old car would go.

Ryan squawked in my ear, making his Dino noise, "Raar, raar." I steeled myself to look into his eyes, but I saw nothing there except baby innocence and stubborn insistence.

"Daddy, why did that bird want to get at Ryan?"

"It was probably sick in its head, honey."

I looked over at my beloved father. His face was hot and red, his hair dark and flat from having sweated beneath his hat. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He usually drove with one arm out the window, but both hands were clenched on the wheel.

"Where are we going?"

"Sydney."

I didn't need to ask why. I turned to stare out my window, letting the flow of familiar country pass by in a blur, knowing that he did not believe what he had said about the bird.

"Ryan killed it," I said.

He glanced at me, eyes squinting. "Don't be silly."

"He did!" Dad kept his eyes on the road, but he was frowning. "I think the old man sent it." I continued.

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He shot me a quick look. "What?"

"The crow. It was watching us. It had his eyes."

This time he *really* looked at me. "A bird is just a bird," he said.

I stared back. "And babies don't really hatch from eggs?"

Between us, Ryan was pulling Dino's legs with his grubby little fingers. He looked up at me, from beneath the floppy brim of his hat. "Raar, raar," he said.

Ryan soon fell asleep again, the dinosaur slipping by degrees from his curled fingers, his long lashes nested above the curve of his chubby cheek. A line of drool spooled from his soft lips, spiraling down to the car seat.

We stopped to fill up the tank and get some snacks. I was mad at Dad for taking us away from home, and took it out on him by pinching Ryan until he woke up, cranky.

Yellow Dog and I both needed to pee, so I let the dog out of the car and we both took off in search of a toilet. When I got back, Ryan was happily chewing on a biscuit and Dad had found a bucket of water and a sponge to wash the windscreen. I watched as the crow's blood mixed with the soapy water, trailing down the filthy glass, carving red channels like river deltas into the caked dirt, until it was all washed away.

That night, we stayed at a roadside motel. There was a "No Pets Allowed" sign, so we kept Yellow Dog hidden in the back of Elsie until we could sneak him into our room.

"You love Ryan, don't you?" I asked, as Dad herded me into bed. Ryan and I shared the double, but he was already asleep, lying flat out on his tummy.

Dad looked unhappy and tired. "Of course."

"I bet Mr. Pham doesn't."

Dad gave me an exasperated look. "'Lainie, I'm tired. Please don't try it on."

I knew I had to keep the whine out of my voice, I had to make him understand. "I'm not, Daddy. It's just that I don't care about Mr. Pham, or his ancestors. Ryan hatched for *us* and we love him. That must mean he was *meant* to be with us. Doesn't it?"

Dad stared at me for such a long time, I became upset, thinking that he was mad at me for listening to his conversation. Suddenly he got up and went into the bathroom. I heard him washing his face. He came back in and sat down.

"Ryan needs someone who understands his nature," he said. "Someone who can help him become what he is meant to be."

I was crying now. I wanted to stay serious and calm, instead I wailed, "But *you're* his daddy!"

Disturbed by our voices, the baby stirred and hiccupped, but he didn't wake.

"What are you going to do?" I whispered.

"What I have to," he admitted. "I will make sure that Mr. Pham has everything Ryan needs, and then we'll say goodbye and go home."

I felt my temper rise, the one that Dad said was just like his. "He's *my* baby dragon!"

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It was only later that I realized what I had said.

Dad understood. He was a good listener. He looked away. "I love Ryan too," he said, "but I should never have taken the egg."

The burn of my temper was already fizzling out. I groped for something to say. "Did you steal it?"

He shook his head. "If someone tried to sell you a dragon's egg, would you believe them?"

I shrugged. *Why not?*

"I didn't, but I had promised to bring you back something beautiful, and although she told me the stories, she didn't believe them any more than I did."

"She?"

He gave me a small smile. "Mr. Pham's daughter. I liked her, and I wanted to help, so I bought the egg." This time it was his turn to shrug. "She used the money to leave her village, and I don't think Mr. Pham, or I, will ever see her again."

I didn't want to think about my dad liking *anyone's* daughter. "Do you know any more stories about Au Co?"

Dad rubbed his eyes. Sighed. "A short one, then sleep. Deal?"

I accepted with a serious nod. "Deal."

He gathered his thoughts for a second. "Do you remember those nights, when we counted stars, and I told you that around some of them are worlds?"

I nodded. Of course I remembered.

"Well, somewhere out there is a world called Kandoarin, and that is where Au Co came from."

"How?"

"I don't really know that part. The story goes that Au Co had a special power, something called *Kansaith,* which meant that she could travel long distances very quickly."

"Like flying?"

"No one knows. Au Co was the only person to ever come here from Kandoarin, and that was by accident. She used her power during one of Kandoarin's eclipses, but the forces that she harnessed were too great for her to control. Instead of traveling from one part of her world to another, she tore a hole in the fabric of space."

Yeah, right. "Are you making this up?"

"Okay, so I've modernized it a bit in the retelling," he admitted, grinning. "That's what happens to myths."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I like the idea of Au Co falling through a hole in the sky."

Dad was in full storytelling mode now. "Maybe she did fall out of the sky, but before she could get here, she had to build some sort of bridge."

In my mind's eye, I saw the arc of the Milky Way. "Do you think it's still there?"

"Even if it is, I don't think it would be the sort of thing you or I would recognize. But Au Co only came to Earth because she couldn't go back to Kandoarin."

"Why not?"

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Dad sighed, a little theatrically, I thought. "How am I going to finish if you keep interrupting me?"

I ran my finger across my mouth, zippering it shut.

"Better," he said. "So, Au Co realized that she had done something terrible. There are dangerous things living in the cold between the worlds. One of these things slipped through the hole that she had made and attacked Kandoarin.

"She was the only one who had the power to destroy it, or force it back through the rift, but she was too afraid, or too tired, to fight. This thing from space coiled itself around Kandoarin's heart and made the mountains tremble and cities fall."

I loved it when Dad waxed lyrical, but outrage forced me to break my vow of silence. "She ran away!"

Dad took an alarmed look at Ryan, and put his finger to his lips to shush me. "Maybe there was nothing she could do," he said quietly. "The tragedy had happened, and if she tried to go back, it would only kill her. Instead, she used her skill and power to survive. She found herself washed up on Earth, where she had to learn how to live amongst people very different from her own. That takes courage, doesn't it? She never tried to use *Kansaith* again. Maybe she was afraid of making the same mistake, or perhaps she had used up all her power, but Au Co spent the rest of her life thinking of what she had done, and wondering how she could make it right again."

"She didn't!" I whispered fiercely. "She got married and had eggs instead!"

"She was a long way from home," Dad said patiently, "and you watch too much television." He came over and gently pushed me down, pulling the blanket up to my chin. "Anyway, that's how the story goes. It was all a very long time ago. Since then, the Red River delta became the land of Van Lang, then the kingdom of Nam Viet became Vietnam." He finished tucking me in and stared down at Ryan. "All that time, Au Co's descendents guarded the last egg, until even they stopped believing in the stories."

I leant over and stroked Ryan's hair, until it occurred to me that it was the color of crow's feathers. I looked up at Dad, disturbed by the thought. "Is he going to breathe fire when he grows up?"

Dad got up and turned off the light. "We had a deal, remember?"

"But—"

"Sleep!"

Something woke me up later that night. Through bleary eyes, I saw Dad carrying the baby around on his shoulder, a half-empty bottle in one hand, singing nonsense tunes in a soft, exhausted voice.

Dad was short-tempered with the both of us the next day. I thought that was unfair, since it was Ryan who had kept him up all night. It wasn't my fault that it was hot in the car, and boring. Even Yellow Dog demanded breaks more often than usual.

I watched the scenery change from countryside to dense forest. "What do you think Kandoarin is like?" I asked, wanting to fill the silence.

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"Da," said Ryan. He leaned against his seat restraints, and started to wave his hand backward and forward beneath the sunlight streaming through Elsie's windscreen.

Dad took off his sunglasses, squinting at the road while he rubbed one eye and then the other. He scratched the stubble on his cheek.

We caught up with the traffic ahead; a red Toyota tailgating a long, wide truck, waiting for its moment to overtake.

"Maybe like here," Dad said after a long pause. He took a quick glance down at Ryan. "Probably different."

Ryan looked up at him, finger shadows danced across our laps. "Da, ook."

Dad's smile was the saddest thing I'd ever seen. The lines around his mouth had deepened. He brought his eyes back to the road and gave a jaw-cracking yawn. "I'm going to have to take a coffee break soon," he said.

"How different?" I demanded, feeling ignored.

Ahead of us, the driver of the red Toyota had still not succeeded in overtaking the truck. I could see him arguing with the woman next to him, even while he moved the car out into the opposite lane to check for oncoming traffic. He nipped back into his lane just in time.

"Bloody idiot," said Dad.

"Da, ook," said Ryan. "Uddy idiot."

I giggled.

"Oh, well," murmured Dad. "Just get on with it," he told the red Toyota.

Ryan turned to me. He pointed to the truck. "'Ainie, ook!"

"It's just a stupid truck," I said. "Bloody idiot."

"Elaine," Dad warned.

Ryan was jumping up and down in his seat now. "Ook! Ook!"

Yellow Dog started whining. "Oh, for goodness sake," exclaimed Dad. "What *is* it?"

The red Toyota pulled out into the other lane and started overtaking the truck.

"Bang. Bang," Ryan said softly. He looked up at me, put his hands to his ears. "Bang, bang, 'Ainie."

There was a loud crack, followed immediately by a BOOM! A cloud of dust billowed as the truck swerved first one way, then the other. Its front tires hit the verge, kicking up a cloud of dirt and pebbles that spattered and clicked on Elsie's hood and windscreen.

"Shit," swore Dad, braking hard. Ryan and I were thrown against our seatbelts, and I felt Yellow Dog hit the back of my chair with a heavy thump. Dog and I both yelped.

The road was suddenly strewn with long, thin shreds of rubber, writhing like big black snakes, and the front of the truck listed to the right. It swung across the road and caught the Toyota, dragging the small car underneath its high chassis. The truck's huge, double tires locked into a skid, jammed against the already crumpled Toyota. There was another agonized screech of metal, and a horrible crunch, as the truck's load shifted, and, in slow motion, it twisted and started to go over.

Elsie shuddered and jounced, slowing but still carried forward by her

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momentum. Dad was shouting something but I didn't understand. I could only hold my breath as the distance between us, the mangled Toyota and the overturning truck, shrank.

Then we hit the oil. Elsie's brakes locked, we spun, and slid sideways even as the truck landed with a crash and a long arc of sparks flew out like firecrackers. The accident was still happening; smoke, dust and burnt rubber, my father's shouts, and Ryan's high-pitched wailing filled my world.

The wreckage ahead of us became a creature of motion and form. As we slid toward it, I saw a face emerge; not the face of a person, but of something dark, alive and angry. The cloud of dust and smoke opened at the center, became a mouth into which we were sliding. Smoke belched out of its jaws and the vague shape of the red Toyota was its tongue. The bright sunlight pierced the clouds, and became two hot, white eyes.

Beside me, Ryan was struggling against the pressure of his seat restraints. He was gasping, his hands pushing palm outward. His "go away" sign.

Go away! Go away!

I moaned. The mouth of the smoking monster closed in around us and I waited for the crunch, knowing that it was going to hurt. I felt a pressure push me *back* against my seat, the Land Rover stalled, and then there was nothing but dead quiet.

The darkness began to shred as light wove its way back into existence. Dad's breathing was a hoarse whisper. I think he was trying to speak. His hand touched my arm.

"I'm okay," I tried to say, but nothing came out except a croak.

The tattered smoke and dust cloud thinned and then blew away, revealing wreckage, but no monster, except the accident's carnage . . . and Elsie, safe—on the other side of it.

I looked across at Dad, slumped in his seat, his hands clenched to Elsie's steering wheel. Then he sat back and took a shuddering breath. He started the car and drove us off the road, on to the verge. "Stay here," he said.

He got out of the car, took a few steps, and vomited. Hands on knees, he breathed deeply and then managed an unsteady shamble back to the accident.

I unclipped my seat belt, turned around, and knelt over the back of my seat. Yellow Dog was still in the space between the seats. He looked up and whined, too shocked to move.

"'Ainie?" Ryan whispered. I looked at him and his eyes were huge and wet. "Raar, raar," he sniffled. He rubbed his nose, spreading snot across his cheeks. I pulled out the hankie Dad kept behind his car chair and wiped it away. He pawed at me, wanting to be released, so I unclipped his belt. He crawled onto my cushions and we clung to each other.

The police and ambulance came soon after, and Dad returned to us. He sat in his seat for a long while, staring out the window. "Those two people are dead," he said quietly, and then he turned to look at Ryan.

He leant over and picked him up, put him back into his seat and clipped him in. Ryan protested until Dad kissed him on the cheek, pressing his nose against the little boy's soft skin. "Thank you," he murmured.

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A policeman appeared at Dad's window. He handed Dad a piece of paper. "Here's the station address, Mr. Ashton, if you recall anything else, let us know. You'll probably be asked to appear as a witness."

Dad took the paper. "Of course. Thanks." The policeman nodded, glanced curiously at Ryan and me, before turning on his heel.

"Did you tell them what happened, Daddy?"

"The truck's front tire blew-out, the driver lost control and hit the Toyota," he said. "They know what happened."

"But, we were *behind* the truck, and then—" I faltered, my voice trailing away.

Dad started Elsie, looked over his shoulder, and pulled out onto the road. Something crunched as he mishandled a gear. "Yes," he said. "Aren't we lucky."

That evening, we were lost in Sydney city. Dad pulled a tattered old streetmap out from the glove compartment, studying it during stops at traffic lights. He seemed to know where he wanted to go, but "they" had apparently changed the road system since he had last visited the Big Smoke. I drifted in and out of sleep, with my head against Ryan's chair and he with his head slumped to his chest in deep exhaustion.

I woke when Dad opened the door on my side and gently lifted me out. Monkey-like, I wrapped arms and legs around him, my head on his shoulder. Holding me with one arm, he unclipped Ryan from his seat, and, with a practiced scoop, put him up onto his other shoulder. He kicked the door shut.

Through half-closed eyes, I could see tugboats and rotting hulks moored alongside huge wooden pylons. There was the slap of water against slippery stone walls and the smell of spilt diesel. I heard the familiar *eek* of rats and the scuttle of things disturbed by our passing. Yellow Dog whined and pressed close to Dad.

The warmth of my father's body and the broad expanse of his shoulder lulled me back to sleep. I tucked my thumb into my mouth and remember nothing more until the morning.

I woke up to sunlight slanting through a broken glass window, on a comfortable mattress, with a soft blanket tucked around me. Ryan was asleep next to me, curled up around his thumb and Dino, a rich smell wafting up from the gap between diaper and back. I crinkled my nose and looked around.

We were in a warehouse. Narrow shafts of light found their way through the mismatched corrugation of the roof and dirty glass windows high on the walls, spotlighting clouds of dust. Aromas came from everywhere; hanging baskets full of herbs and grasses, drying flowers hung from the rafters and from the rusting iron girders that criss-crossed the space above, a wok set upon a huge old-fashioned iron cooker in one corner.

Scattered around the warehouse floor was an expanse of garden ornaments and strange relics of all shapes and designs. Carved stone beasts with tusks and huge eyes crouched next to plaster flamingos. Fat, grin-

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ning Buddhas sat next to toga-draped Venuses. In the spaces between, there was a sense of pressure, like an oncoming thunderstorm. The air felt electric.

I saw Yellow Dog lying on a patch of carpet in the corner, near a stove and small sink. A door opened behind him and Dad came through, ducking his head beneath the doorframe, with Mr. Pham close behind. The old man was dressed in loose, white cotton trousers and a long overcoat with wide sleeves. He looked comfortable and cool.

Yellow Dog's tail thumped on the carpet. Mr. Pham paused to pat him, but he ducked his head away. I could see his thick fur shivering, like it did when flies annoyed him. Mr. Pham stood, with his hand outstretched, until Yellow Dog whined and rolled onto his back.

I heard the old man chuckle, and didn't like it. Dad didn't seem to care. He stood listlessly to one side, stoop-shouldered, one hand leaning against the edge of the stove. He had changed his shirt for a clean T-shirt, but he still looked bedraggled, as if with one small push, he too might roll over.

I went to the mattress and knelt next to Ryan. He stirred, opened his sleepy, dark eyes. His thumb came out of his mouth with a sucking sound and he gave a little sigh of resignation. "'Otty?"

I nodded and he rolled over onto his bottom and opened his arms to be picked up. There was a damp squishing against my hip, and I grimaced, trying not to take too deep a breath. Ryan's head was against my shoulder, his soft hair fluffy against my cheek.

"Ryan's needing a change," I said, taking him toward Dad, but Mr. Pham intercepted me with ease. With a firm hand, he herded me back to the mattress. He produced a diaper and a small towel from one voluminous sleeve, and pins, wipes, and powder from the other.

I stared at him in astonishment, wondering what else he might produce, but that seemed to be all for now. He put the towel down on the floor and gently pried Ryan from my grasp. With practiced hands, he quickly cleaned and changed him, while Ryan gazed up solemnly.

I saw Dad staring at us, with the same look on his face that I had seen when he had cried to the stars.

"Daughter, please take this to your father."

My name is *Elaine,* I wanted to say. I took the folded diaper but didn't move.

"Ryan used *Kansaith* yesterday," I said. It sounded like an accusation. I sensed the words hanging in the air, amidst the flowers and the baskets, heard faint whispers bounce from Buddhas and stone creatures, echoes that sounded like a breeze through dry grass.

I lowered my voice. "What is this place?"

The old man glanced around. "It is an edge," he said.

"That doesn't make sense."

Mr. Pham pursed his lips. "A shore, a threshold—a door." He lifted Ryan to his feet and spent a moment admiring his handiwork. "And here," he said with pride, "is the key." He studied the little boy for another moment, as if he were memorizing every crease, every fold of soft skin. Ryan squirmed, wriggling to get free.

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"'Ainie," he pointed to the strange collection of *things* surrounding us. "Ook."

The old man smiled at this. "He knows. Oh, yes. He can *feel* it." He cocked his head sideways, looking at me in a way that reminded me of a bird considering its next meal. "Can *you* feel it, daughter? There is great power in the relationship of simple things to each other." He looked from me to Ryan, back again. "I had not considered that such power might also exist between children."

Relationship of simple things—was he calling me stupid? "What about the crow that attacked us," I demanded. "And yesterday—I saw a face; with big jaws and white eyes."

"What about it?" he asked. "Perhaps you have one of those overactive imaginations, eh?"

I know it was you, I wanted to say. *You're trying to scare us.* I shook my head firmly.

Mr. Pham was still kneeling, so we were eye to eye. I studied that broad face, as brown and lined as drought-cracked mud, with cheekbones so high they cast shadows. His long silver hair was drawn back from his face into a ponytail, and beneath grey eyebrows bristling with unruly hairs were eyes so black, I could not see the pupils. Strange eyes.

Ryan's eyes.

"I don't like you," I said.

The old man nodded. "Good. I don't like you, either."

Ryan had crawled onto the mattress to retrieve Dino. "When he grows up, I'm going to teach him to fly," I declared. "And he's going to breathe fire." *And eat nasty old men,* I finished silently. At that point, Dad came over, clearly intending to scold me. He went to take my arm, but Mr. Pham motioned him away and he stopped in his tracks, swaying like a drunk.

"Daughters need a firm hand," he told Dad. "They must be taught respect."

Mr. Pham rocked onto his toes, rising gracefully to his feet. He didn't look so old any more. "Are you a sorceress? You will need to be, if you are to hide from that which hunts him."

"I'm not scared." *Of you.*

His bushy eyebrows drew together. "You should be."

Ryan decided to rejoin us, bouncing his way across the mattress on hands and knees. Gripping his toy with one fist, he put his other arm around my leg. "'Ainie-ay," he sang in his lispy voice.

I put my arm around his shoulders. "Ryan hatched for me."

"And you think that I am jealous?" He seemed to think about it for a moment. "Perhaps," he admitted, "if I permitted such feeling. But I do not. Nor grief. Such things must be put aside." He gestured at Dad; fingers moving in slanted light, shifting dust motes and shadows.

"We have to go now, 'Lainie," said Dad in a toneless voice.

I pulled Ryan closer and he hugged me back. He pointed Dino at the old man, "raar."

Mr. Pham's eyes narrowed. Suddenly he raised his arms and the light in the warehouse dimmed. A copper-colored gloom descended upon us.

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The sleeves of his white tunic slid back to his shoulders, revealing muscled, brown arms and a fine layering of tattoos, like glittering scales.

I quailed. "Daddy?"

"So, *you* would teach him?" Thundered the old man. "And when Kandoarin's eclipse comes and its doom awakens, what then? Tell me, little girl, will the Youngest Son be ready?"

Between us, dust motes danced, as if the air was fluid, their movement captured in shafts of filtered light, whirlpools of motion, like froth stirred into coffee.

A low, deep sound pulsed above my head, the beating heart of some great beast crouching amidst the rafters and beams. The shadows deepened, melded into a darkness that pooled around our feet.

"Already the hunter is stirring. Without me, it will find him; and crush him, and all will fail." He lowered his arms and the throbbing sound dimmed, became the panicked beat of my own heart.

Mr. Pham held out his hand to Ryan. "Bắc Vuông," he said. "Come to me."

"No!"

Startled, I saw my exhausted Dad draw himself up. Yellow Dog had come to heel. He crouched at Dad's feet, brown eyes focused on the old man, lips slightly raised over sharp canines.

Dad's voice was hoarse. "I don't care what you are," he said. "Don't threaten my children!" He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I've had enough."

Mr. Pham nodded stiffly. "Yes. It is time for you to leave."

"Right," said Dad. "Ryan."

He immediately left me and waddled over, lifting his arms. Dad hauled him up, put him on a hip.

"Elaine."

I gleefully dropped the dirty diaper and rushed to take his hand.

"I nearly made a terrible mistake," Dad said. "I was afraid of things I half-believed. Now I *do* believe, and you know what? I don't care. I don't care what he is. I am a father. That is *my* duty. C'mon, Dog."

We turned our backs on the old man. The door was just *there,* we were headed toward it. I felt the brush of Yellow Dog's fur against my leg. I felt like skipping.

We walked fast, but I hadn't realized how *big* the warehouse was—our efforts to reach the door only seemed to push it away. Dad stumbled to a stop. "You bastard," he muttered.

"Daddy?"

"It's okay, honey. Everything will be okay." We turned around again, slowly.

I was half expecting a drum roll, or Mr. Pham to sprout fangs or wings, or perhaps the beasts of plaster and stone to come alive. As Dad said, I watch too much television.

Mr. Pham was just standing there. A strange, magnetic old man, with eyes that glittered in the weird light and a shadow that stretched across the warehouse, pooling around our feet like black ink.

"The Youngest Son knows what he must do," Mr. Pham said. He lifted a hand and motioned. *Come*. Ryan wriggled out of Dad's arms, as impossible to hold against his will as an eel. In a blink, he was out of our reach

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and toddling over to the old man. It happened so quickly. He took a few steps away from us, and suddenly he was enveloped in dust motes twisting into forms that swam in the air and shimmered like a mirage; multicolored scales, the curve of horns and claw, the glint of black eyes.

The old man threw back his head and laughed out loud. Then, with a conqueror's flourish, he went down on one knee. As he did so, his shadow shrank back, like a dark tide receding. He put out his hand for Ryan to take, and I knew that the moment he did, they would disappear, like Alice's rabbit.

Into that outstretched hand, Ryan gravely placed Dino the dinosaur. "Uddy idiot," he said cheerfully. Then he turned around to come back to us, leaving the old man stranded in confusion, holding a thoroughly gnawed and misused rubber toy. Mr. Pham looked straight at me, and I saw his fury, felt the heat of his intent across the space between us.

A wide, cheeky grin split Ryan's face as he put up his arms, ready for take-off.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Dad, scooping him up.

Mr. Pham surged forward, only to be met halfway by a bristling, furious Yellow Dog, flashing canines full of promise. So we stood, my father and I, and the dog, in a little triangle, and we were as one.

"Simple things," I reminded the old man.

"Willful, disobedient child," he said to me. He looked at Dad and his face was suddenly very sad. "Your love will cost you dearly," he said. "I would have spared you the suffering." He locked eyes with Ryan, and then he opened his hand, letting Dino drop to the ground. It bounced once, and vanished.

Like a screen coming down between us, the gloom gathered around Mr. Pham, softening his form, blurring his features. He stepped back, into the shadows.

We turned and rushed for the door, and this time nothing conspired against us. We emerged into a tiny shop-front, stacked full of rolled-up carpets and dusty furniture. A pair of floor-to-ceiling windows, half-covered in tattered posters stuck to the outside, faced out onto yet another bright, sunny day.

There was old Elsie, parked outside. We were going home. Nothing bad had happened. Dad had kept us together, and I sensed that I had changed. I felt grown-up, a big sister, strong in ways I couldn't describe. One day, Au Co's youngest son will cross his bridge, but not yet. For now, he chooses to be with us, and that is a powerful magic.

I looked up and saw my little brother gazing down at me from over Dad's shoulder. "Knock. Knock," he said.

I grinned back at him. "Who's there?"

"Me!" He announced. Lifting his hands, he curled them into claws. "*Raar.*" ○

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THE HAT THING

Matthew Hughes

Matthew Hughes's next science fiction novel is *Black Brillion* (Tor, November 2004). He's also published *Fools Errant* and *Fool Me Twice* (Warner Aspect, 2001), collected as *Gullible's Travels* (SFBC, 2001), and his short SF has appeared in *F&SF*. The author's alter ego, Matt Hughes, has sold short suspense to *Blue Murder, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* and *Storyteller,* and he has published one suspense novel, *Downshift*. Mr. Hughes lives on Vancouver Island. His web page is at *http://mars.ark.com/~mhughes*.

"See that?" Medgar said. "You see how he handled the hat thing?"

"What hat thing?" I said.

He wound the tape back and said, "Watch."

I watched. Gene Wilder, in a neat gray suit and wide brimmed fedora, knocked on the front door of a big stone house. A woman in a servant's uniform opened the door. There was some dialogue and the woman tried to close the door, but the actor put his foot in the way and said something.

"Now watch," Medgar said.

The video cut to a scene shot from inside the foyer of the house. Wilder came in and took off his hat.

"There," said Medgar. "That was the way it was done."

"The way what was done?" I said.

"The whole business with hat etiquette."

"What's hat etiquette?"

"It's why he doesn't take off his hat and then he does."

My face must have told him I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Look," he said, "this movie is set in the thirties, right? And Wilder plays a gentlemanly character, a theater director with good manners."

"Okay. So?"

"So when she answers the door, he doesn't take his hat off, even though you're supposed to take your hat off when you meet a woman. But he doesn't."

"Why not?"

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"Because she's just the maid. If she'd been the lady of the house, the hat would have come off."

"But he takes it off when he goes inside," I said.

"'Cause you did when you went into somebody's house. That's old-style hat etiquette. Like you go into a restaurant, it's hats off. You go into a bar, it stays on."

"I see people wearing baseball caps in restaurants all the time."

"Yeah, now," he said. "Go back fifty, sixty years, you didn't."

"And this has to do with what?" I said.

"With time travel. Specifically, with time travelers."

"Time travelers?"

"Yeah," he said. "Assume that someday, somebody invents time travel."

"Yeah, right."

"Hey, give people a million years to look into it, who knows?"

I shrugged and didn't say anything.

"The thing is," he went on, "time travel only has to be invented once and then we'll have time travelers showing up all through history—not to mention visits to see dinosaurs and sabertooths."

"Would anyone really want to travel through time?" I said.

"Sure. Researchers. Tourists. Criminals altering their present by manipulating the past. Religious pilgrims. Collectors. Who knows what motivates people a million years from now?"

I shrugged again.

"The thing is," Medgar said, "the further back they come, the less likely they get all the details right—the little things like hat etiquette that nobody in the future knows because nobody in the past ever wrote it down."

"Why didn't they?"

"Because everybody already knew what to do with their hats."

I tried to change the subject. "Who did you vote for on that TV show?"

But he wouldn't let it go. "No, listen, here's the thing. You know the people you see downtown, you wonder did they just come down from the mother ship?"

"Those people are mentally ill," I said.

"Sure, most of them. But maybe one or two are the earliest explorers from one million AD. They're the ones who did the first reconnaissance so that the later time travelers can blend in better."

"You don't talk about this kind of stuff to people you work with, do you?" I asked. "Or your other neighbors?"

"No, I just thought of it. Anyway, the latecomers are pretty well camouflaged but there will still be things that will be out of synch—like the hat thing. We look for that stuff, we can find the time travelers."

I took out a cigarette and tapped one end of it against the back of my hand, then put it in my mouth.

"Hey, yeah," he said. "That's a good one. People haven't done the ciggie tap since everybody switched to filters."

He laughed, then he saw the look on my face.

"Sorry," I said, although a moment later he was a lot sorrier.

I put his ashes in a plastic sack and carried it out to the chute. Then I went back for the Wilder tape. Somebody upslope would want to study it. ○

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ELECTOR

Charles Stross

Charles Stross's previous novelette in this series, "Nightfall," made the 2004 Hugo final ballot, as did his novel *Singularity Sky*. His most recent SF novel, *Iron Sunrise* (a sequel to *Singularity Sky*), was published by Ace books in July, and his next novel, *A Family Trade*, is due out from Tor at the end of September. This novella, along with the other stories in this series, will be published by Ace as *Accelerando* in July 2005.

Sirhan walks, shrouded in isolation, through the crowds gathered for the festival. The only people who see him are the chattering ghosts of dead politicians and writers, deported from the inner system by order of the Vile Offspring. The great terraforming project is nearly complete, the festival planet dressed for a jubilee that will last almost twenty of its years—four pre-singularity lifetimes—before the Demolition. The green and pleasant plain stretches toward a horizon a thousand kilometers away, beneath a lemon-yellow sky. The air smells faintly of ammonia and the big spaces are full of small ideas: for this is the last human planet in the solar system.

"Excuse me, are you real?" someone asks him in American-accented English.

It takes a moment or two for Sirhan to disengage from his introspection and realize that he's being spoken to. "What?" he asks, slightly puzzled. Wiry and pale, Sirhan wears the robes of a Berber goat-herd on his body and the numinous halo of a utility fog-bank above his head: in his abstraction, he vaguely resembles a saintly shepherd in a post-singularity nativity play. "I say, what?" Outrage simmers at the back of his mind—*is nowhere private?*—but, as he turns, he sees that one of the ghost pods has split lengthwise across its white mushroom-like crown, spilling a trickle of left-over construction fluid and a completely hairless, slightly bemused-looking Anglo male who wears an expression of profound surprise.

"I can't find my implants," the Anglo male says, shaking his head. "But I'm really *here,* aren't I? Incarnate?" He glances round at the other pods. "This isn't a sim."

Sirhan sighs—*another exile*—and sends forth a daemon to interrogate the ghost pod's abstract interface. It doesn't tell him much—unlike most

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of the resurrectees, this one seems to be undocumented. "You've been dead. Now you're alive. I *suppose* that means you're now almost as real as I am. What else do you need to know?"

"When is—" The newcomer stops. "Can you direct me to the processing center?" he asks carefully. "I'm disoriented."

Sirhan is surprised—most immigrants take a lot longer to figure that out. "Did you die recently?" he asks.

"I'm not sure I died at all." The newcomer rubs his bald head, looking puzzled. "Hey, no jacks!" He shrugs, exasperated. "Look, the processing center. . . ?"

"Over there." Sirhan gestures at the monumental mass of the Boston Museum of Science (shipped all the way from Earth a couple of decades ago to save it from the demolition of the inner system). "My mother runs it." He smiles thinly.

"Your mother—" the newly resurrected immigrant stares at him intensely, then blinks. "Holy shit." He takes a step toward Sirhan. "Wow, you're—"

Sirhan recoils and snaps his fingers. The thin trail of vaporous cloud that has been following him all this time, shielding his shaven pate from the diffuse red glow of the swarming shells of orbital nanocomputers that have replaced the inner planets, extrudes a staff of hazy blue mist that stretches down from the air and slams together in his hand like a quarterstaff spun from bubbles. "Are you threatening me, sir?" he asks, deceptively mildly.

"I—" the newcomer stops dead. Then he throws back his head and laughs. "You must be Sirhan. You take after your grandmother, kid."

"Kid?" Sirhan bristles. "Who do you think—" A horrible thought occurs to him. "Oh. Oh dear." A wash of adrenalin drenches him in warm sweat. "I do believe we've met, in a manner of speaking. . . ." *Oh boy, this is going to upset* so *many applecarts,* he realizes, spinning off a ghost to think about the matter. If grandfather is back, the implications are enormous.

The naked newcomer nods, grinning at some private joke. "And now I'm human again." He runs his hands down his ribs, pauses, and glances at Sirhan owlishly. "Um. I didn't mean to frighten you. But I don't suppose you could find your aged grandfather something to wear?"

Sirhan sighs and points his staff straight up at the sky. The rings are edge-on, for the lilypad continent floats above an ocean of cold gas along Saturn's equator, and they glitter like a ruby laser beam slashed across the sky. "Let there be aerogel."

A cloud of whispy soap-bubble congeals in a cone shape above the newly resurrected ancient and drops over him, forming a kaftan. "Thanks," he says. He looks round, twisting his neck, then winces. "Damn, that *hurt.* Ouch. I need to get myself a set of implants."

"They can sort you out in the processing center. It's in the basement in the west wing. They'll give you something more permanent to wear, too." Sirhan peers at him. "Your face—" he pages through rarely used memories. Yes, it's Manfred Macx, as he looked in the early years of the last century. As he looked around the time mother-not was born. There's something positively indecent about meeting your own grandfather in the full

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flush of youth. "Are you sure you haven't been messing with your phenotype?" he asks suspiciously.

"No, this is what I used to look like. I think. Back in the naked ape again, after all these years as an emergent function of a flock of passenger pigeons." His grandfather smirks. "What's your mother going to say?"

"I really don't know—" Sirhan shakes his head. "Come on, let's get you to immigrant processing. You're sure you're not just a historical simulation?"

The place is already heaving with the re-simulated. Just why the Vile Offspring seem to feel it's necessary to apply valuable exaquops to the job of deriving accurate simulations of dead humans—outrageously accurate simulations of long-dead lives, annealed until their written corpus matches that inherited from the pre-singularity era in the form of chicken scratchings on mashed tree pulp—much less beaming them at the refugee camps on Saturn—is beyond Sirhan's ken: but he wishes they'd stop.

"Just a couple of days ago, I crapped on your lawn. Hope you don't mind." Manfred cocks his head to one side and stares at Sirhan with beady eyes. "Actually, I'm here because of the upcoming election. It's got the potential to turn into a major crisis point, and I figured Amber would need me around."

"Well you'd better come on in, then," Sirhan says resignedly as he climbs the steps, enters the foyer, and leads his turbulent grandfather into the foggy haze of utility nanomachines that fill the building.

He can't wait to see what his mother will do when she meets her father in the flesh, after all this time.

Welcome to Saturn, your new home world. This FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) memeplex is designed to orient you and explain the following:

- **How you got here**
- **Where "here" is**
- **Things you should avoid doing**
- **Things you might want to do as soon as possible**
- **Where to go for more information**

If you are remembering this presentation, you are probably *re-simulated*. This is not the same as being *resurrected*. You may remember dying. Do not worry: like all your other memories, it is a fabrication. In fact, this is the first time you have ever been alive. (Exception: if you died after the *singularity* you may be a genuine *resurrectee*. In which case, why are you reading this FAQ?)

How you got here: the center of the solar system—Mercury, Venus, Earth's Moon, Mars, the asteroid belt, and Jupiter—have been dismantled, or are being dismantled, by weakly godlike intelligences. [NB: monotheistic clergy and Europeans who remember living prior to 1600, see alternative memeplex "*in the beginning.*"] A weakly godlike intelligence is not a supernatural agency, but the product of a highly advanced society that learned how to artificially create souls [late twentieth century: *software*] and translate human minds into souls and vice versa. [Core concepts: human beings all have souls. Souls are software objects. Software is not immortal.]

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Some of the weakly godlike intelligences appear to cultivate an interest in their human antecedents—for whatever reason is not known. (Possibilities include the study of history through horticulture, entertainment through live-action roleplaying, revenge, and economic forgery.) While no definitive analysis is possible, all the re-simulated persons to date exhibit certain common characteristics: they are all based on *well-documented historical persons*, their memories show suspicious gaps [see: *smoke and mirrors*], and they are ignorant of or predate the *singularity* [see: *Turing Oracle, Vinge Catastrophe*].

It is believed that the weakly godlike agencies have created you as a vehicle for the introspective study of your historical antecedent by backward-chaining from your corpus of documented works, and the back-projected genome derived from your collateral descendants, to generate an abstract description of your computational state vector. This technique is extremely intensive [see: *expTime-complete algorithms, Turing Oracle, time travel, industrial magic*] but marginally plausible in the absence of supernatural explanations.

After experiencing your life, the weakly godlike agencies have expelled you. For reasons unknown, they chose to do this by transmitting your upload state and genome/proteome complex to receivers owned and operated by a consortium of charities based on Saturn. These charities have provided for your basic needs, including the body you now occupy.

In summary: you are a *reconstruction* of someone who lived and died a long time ago, not a *reincarnation*. You have no intrinsic moral right to the identity you believe to be your own, and an extensive body of case law states that you do not inherit your antecedent's possessions. Other than that, you are a free individual.

Note that *fictional re-simulation* is strictly forbidden. If you have reason to believe that you may be a fictional character, you must contact the City *immediately*. [See: *James Bond, Spider Jerusalem*.] Failure to comply is a *felony*.

Where are you? You are on Saturn. Saturn is a gas giant planet 120,500 kilometers in diameter, located 1.5 billion kilometers from Earth's sun. [NB: Europeans who remember living prior to 1580, see alternative memeplex "*the flat earth—not*."] Saturn has been partially terraformed by *posthuman* emigrants from Earth and Jupiter orbit: the ground beneath your feet is, in reality, the floor of a hydrogen balloon the size of a continent, floating in Saturn's upper atmosphere. [NB: Europeans who remember living prior to 1790, internalize the supplementary memeplex: "*the Brothers Mongolfier*."] The balloon is very safe, but mining activities and the use of ballistic weapons are strongly deprecated because the air outside is unbreathable and extremely cold.

The society you have been instantiated in is *extremely wealthy* within the scope of Economics 1.0, the value-transfer system developed by human beings during and after your own time. Money exists, and is used for the usual range of goods and services, but the basics—food, water, air, power, off-the-shelf clothing, housing, historical entertainment, and monster trucks—are *free*. An implicit social contract dictates that in return for access to these facilities, you obey certain laws.

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If you wish to opt out of this social contract, be advised that other worlds may run Economics 2.0 or subsequent releases. These value-transfer systems are more efficient—hence wealthier—than Economics 1.0, but true participation in Economics 2.0 is not possible without dehumanizing cognitive surgery. Thus, in *absolute* terms, although this society is richer than any you have ever heard of, it is also a poverty-stricken backwater compared to its neighbors.

Things you should avoid doing: Many activities that have been classified as crimes in other societies are legal here. These include but are not limited to: acts of worship, art, sex, violence, communication, or commerce between consenting competent sapients of any species, except where such acts transgress the list of prohibitions below. [See additional memeplex: *competence defined*.]

Some activities are prohibited here, but may have been legal in your previous experience. These include: willful deprivation of ability to consent [see: *slavery*], interference in the absence of consent [see: *minors, legal status of*], formation of limited-liability companies [see: *singularity*], and invasion of defended privacy [see: *The Slug, Cognitive Pyramid Schemes, Brain Hacking, Thompson Trust Exploit*].

Some activities unfamiliar to you are highly illegal and should be scrupulously avoided. These include: possession of nuclear weapons, possession of unlimited autonomous replicators [see: *gray goo*], coercive assimilationism [see: *borganism, aggressive*], coercive halting of Turing-equivalent personalities [see: *Basilisks*], and applied theological engineering [see: *God Bothering*].

Some activities superficially familiar to you are merely stupid and should be avoided for your safety, although they are not illegal as such. These include: giving your bank account details to the son of the Nigerian Minister of Finance, buying title to bridges, skyscrapers, spacecraft, planets, or other real assets, murder, selling your identity, and entering into financial contracts with entities running Economics 2.0 or higher.

Things you should do as soon as possible: Many material artifacts you may consider essential to life are freely available—just ask the City, and it will grow you clothes, a house, food, or other basic essentials. Note, however, that the library of public domain structure templates is of necessity restrictive, and does not contain items that are highly fashionable or that remain in copyright. Nor will the City provide you with replicators, weapons, sexual favors, slaves, or zombies.

You are advised to register as a citizen as soon as possible. If the individual you are a resimulation of can be confirmed dead, you may adopt their name but not—in law—any lien or claim on their property, contracts, or descendants. You register as a citizen by asking the City to register you; the process is painless and typically complete within four hours. Unless you are registered, your legal status as a sapient organism may be challenged. The ability to request citizenship rights is one of the legal tests for sapience, and failure to comply may place you in legal jeopardy. You can renounce your citizenship whenever you wish: this may be desirable if you emigrate to another polity.

While many things are free, it is highly likely that you posses no em-

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ployable skills, and therefore no way of earning money with which to purchase unfree items. The pace of change in the past century has rendered almost all skills you may have learned obsolete [see: *singularity*]. However, due to the rapid pace of change, many cooperatives, trusts, and guilds offer on-the-job training or educational loans.

Your ability to learn depends on your ability to take information in the format in which it is offered. *Implants* are frequently used to provide a direct link between your brain and the intelligent machines that surround it. A basic core implant set is available on request from the City. [See: *implant security, firewall, wetware.*]

Your health is probably good if you have just been reinstantiated, and is likely to remain good for some time. Most diseases are curable, and, in event of an incurable ailment or injury a new body may be provided—for a fee. (In event of your murder, you will be furnished with a new body at the expense of your killer.) If you have any pre-existing medical conditions or handicaps, consult the City.

The City is an agoric-annealing participatory democracy with a limited-liability constitution. Its current executive agency is a weakly godlike intelligence that chooses to associate with human-equivalent intelligences: this agency is colloquially known as "Hello Kitty," "Beautiful Cat," or "Aineko," and may manifest itself in a variety of physical avatars if corporeal interaction is desired. (Prior to the arrival of "Hello Kitty," the City used a variety of human-designed expert systems that provided sub-optimal performance.)

The City's mission statement is to provide a mediatory environment for human-equivalent intelligences and to preserve same in the face of external aggression. Citizens are encouraged to participate in the ongoing political processes of determining such responses. Citizens also have a duty to serve on a jury if called (including senatorial service), and to defend the City.

Where to go for further information: Until you have registered as a citizen and obtained basic implants, all further questions should be directed to the City. Once you have learned to use your implants, you will not need to ask this question.

There's a market specializing in clothing and fashion accessories about fifty kilometers away from the transplanted museum where Sirhan's mother lives, at a transportation nexus between three lilypad habitats where tube trains intersect in a huge maglev cloverleaf. The market is crowded with strange and spectacular visuals, algorithms unfolding in faster-than-real time before the candy-striped awnings of tents. Domed yurts belch aromatic smoke from crude fireplaces—what *is* it about hairless primates and their tendency toward pyromania?—around the feet of diamond-walled groundscrapers that pace carefully across the smart roads of the City. The crowds are variegated and wildly mixed, immigrants from every continent shopping and haggling, and, in a few cases, getting out of their skull on strange substances on the pavements in front of giant snail-shelled shibeens and squat bunkers made of thin layers of concrete sprayed over soap-bubble aerogel. There are no automobiles

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here, but a bewildering range of personal transport gadgets, from gyro-stabilized pogo sticks and segways to kettenkrads and spiderpalanquins, jostle for space with pedestrians and animals.

Two women stop outside what, in a previous century, might have been the store window of a fashion boutique: the younger one (blonde, with her hair bound up in elaborate cornrows, wearing black leggings and a long black leather jacket over a camouflage Tee) points to an elaborately retro dress. "Wouldn't my bum look big in that?" she asks, doubtfully.

"Ma cherie, you have but to try it—" The other woman (tall, wearing a pin-striped man's business suit from a previous century) flicks a thought at the window and the mannequin morphs, sprouting the younger woman's head, aping her posture and expression.

"I missed out on the authentic retail experience, you know? It still feels weird to be back somewhere with *shops*. 'S what comes of living off libraries of public domain designs for too long." Amber twists her hips, experimenting. "You get out of the habit of *foraging*. I don't know about this retro thing at all. The Victorian vote isn't critical, is it. . . ?" She trails off.

"You are a twenty-first century platform selling to electors re-simulated and incarnated from the Gilded Age. And yes, a bustle your derriere does enhance. But—" Annette looks thoughtful.

"Hmm." Amber frowns, and the shop window dummy turns and waggles its hips at her, sending tiers of skirts swishing across the floor. Her frown deepens. "If we're really going to go *through* with this election shit, it's not just the resimulant voters I need to convince, but the contemporaries, and that's a matter of substance, not image. They've lived through too much media warfare. They're immune to any semiotic payload short of an active cognitive attack. If I send out partials to canvass them that look as if I'm trying to push buttons—"

"—They will listen to your message and nothing you wear or say will sway them. Don't worry about them, ma cherie. The naive re-simulated are another matter, and perhaps might be swayed. This your first venture into democracy is, in how many years? Your privacy, she is an illusion now. The question is, *what* image will you project? People will listen to you only once you gain their attention. Also, the swing voters you must reach, they are future-shocked, timid. Your platform is radical, should you not project a comfortably conservative image?"

Amber pulls a face, an expression of mild distaste for the whole populist program. "Yes, I suppose I must, if necessary. But on second thoughts *that*—" Amber snaps her fingers and the mannequin turns around once more before morphing back into neutrality, aureolae perfect puckered disks above the top of its bodice— "is just too much."

She doesn't need to merge in the opinions of several different fractional personalities, fashion critics and psephologists both, to figure out that adopting Victorian/Cretan fusion fashion—a breast-and-ass fetishist's fantasy—isn't the way to sell herself as a serious politician to the nineteenth-century post-singularity fringe. "I'm not running for election as the mother of the nation, I'm running because I figure we've got about a billion seconds, at most, to get out of this rat-trap of a gravity well before the Vile Offspring get seriously medieval on our CPU cycles, and if we

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don't convince everyone to come with us, they're doomed. Let's look for something more practical that we can overload with the right signifiers."

"Like your coronation robe?"

Amber winces. "Touché." The Ring Imperium is dead, along with whatever was left over from its early orbital legal framework, and Amber is lucky to be alive as a private citizen in this cold new age at the edge of the halo. "But that was just scenery-setting. I didn't fully understand what I was doing, back then."

"Welcome to maturity and experience." Annette smiles distantly at some faint member: "You don't *feel* older, you just know what you're doing this time. I wonder, sometimes, what Manny would make of it if he were here."

"That bird-brain!" Amber says dismissively, stung by the idea that her father might have something to contribute. She follows Annette past a gaggle of mendicant street evangelists preaching some new religion and in through the door of a real department store, one with actual human sales staff and fitting rooms to cut the clothing to shape. "If I'm sending out fractional me's tailored for different demographics, isn't it a bit self-defeating to go for a single image? I mean, we could drill down and tailor a partial for each individual elector—"

"Per-haps." The door re-forms behind them. "But you need a core identity." Annette looks around, hunting for eye contact with the sales consultant. "To start with a core design, a style, then to work outward, tailoring you for your audience. And besides, there is tonight's—ah, bonjour!"

"Hello. How can we help you?" The two female and one male shop assistants who appear from around the displays—cycling through a history of the couture industry, catwalk models mixing and matching centuries of fashion—are clearly chips off a common primary personality, instances united by their enhanced sartorial obsession. If they're not actually a fashion borganism they're not far from it, dressed head-to-foot in the highest quality Chanel and Armani replicas, making a classical twentieth-century statement. This isn't simply a shop, it's a temple to a very peculiar art form, its staff trained as guardians of the esoteric secrets of good taste.

"Mais oui. We are looking for a wardrobe for my niece here." Annette reaches through the manifold of fashion ideas mapped within the shop's location cache and flips a requirement spec one of her ghosts has just completed at the lead assistant. "She is into politics going, and the question of her image is important."

"We would be *delighted* to help you," purrs the proprietor, taking a delicate step forward: "perhaps you could tell us what you've got in mind?"

"Oh. Well." Amber takes a deep breath, glances sidelong at Annette: Annette stares back, unblinking. *It's your head,* she sends. "I'm involved in the accelerationista administrative program. Are you familiar with it?"

The head coutureborg frowns slightly, twin furrows rippling her brow between perfectly symmetrical eyebrows, plucked to match her classic New Look suit. "I have heard reference to it, but a lady of fashion like myself does not concern herself with politics," she says, a touch self-deprecatingly. "Especially the politics of her clients. Your, ah, aunt said it was a question of image?"

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"Yes." Amber shrugs, momentarily self-conscious about her casual rags. "She's my election agent. My problem, as she says, is there's a certain voter demographic that mistakes image for substance and is afraid of the unknown, and I need to acquire a wardrobe that triggers associations of probity, of respect and deliberation. One suitable for a representative with a radical political agenda but a strong track record. I'm afraid I'm in a hurry to start with—I've got a big fund-raising party tonight. I know it's short notice, but I need something off the shelf for it."

"What exactly is it you're hoping to achieve?" asks the male couturier, his voice hoarse and his r's rolling with some half-shed Mediterranean accent. He sounds fascinated. "If you think it might influence your choice of wardrobe. . . ?"

"I'm running for the assembly," Amber says bluntly. "On a platform calling for a state of emergency and an immediate total effort to assemble a starship. This solar system isn't going to be habitable for much longer, and we need to emigrate. All of us, you included, before the Vile Offspring decide to reprocess us into computronium. I'm going to be doorstepping the entire electorate in parallel, and the experience needs to be personalized." She manages to smile. "That means, I think, perhaps eight outfits and four different independent variables for each, accessories, and two or three hats—enough that each is seen by no more than a few thousand voters. Both physical fabric and virtual. In addition, I'll want to see your range of historical formalwear, but that's of secondary interest for now." She grins. "Do you have any facilities for response-testing the combinations against different personality types from different periods? If we could run up some models, that would be useful."

"I think we can do better than that." The manager nods approvingly, perhaps contemplating her gold-backed deposit account. "Hansel, please divert any further visitors until we have dealt with madam. . . ?"

"Macx. Amber Macx."

"—Macx's requirements." The manager shows no sign of familiarity with the name. Amber winces slightly; it's a sign of how hugely fractured the children of Saturn have become, and of how vast the population of the halo, that only a generation has passed and already barely anyone remembers the Queen of the Ring Imperium. "If you'd come this way, please, we can begin to research an eigenstyle combination that matches your requirements—"

Welcome to decade the eighth, singularity plus one gigasecond (or maybe more—nobody's quite sure when, or indeed *if,* a singularity has been created). The human population of the solar system is either six billion, or sixty billion, depending on whether you class forked state vectors of posthumans and the simulations of dead phenotypes running in the Vile Offspring's Schrödinger boxes as people. Most of the physically incarnate still live on Earth, but the lilypads floating beneath continent-sized hot hydrogen balloons in Saturn's upper atmosphere already house a few million, and the writing is on the wall for the rocky inner planets. All the remaining human-equivalent intelligences with half a clue to rub together are trying to emigrate before the Vile Offspring decide to recycle

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Earth to fill in a gap in the concentric shells of nanocomputers they're running on. It's a nested Matrioshka doll of Dyson spheres that darkens the skies of Earth and has caused a massive crash in the planet's photosynthetic biomass, as plants starve for short-wavelength light.

Since decade the seventh, the computational density of the solar system has soared. Within the asteroid belt, more than half the available planetary mass has been turned into nanoprocessorstied together by quantum-entanglment, into a web so dense that each gram of matter can simulate all the possible life-experiences of an individual human being in a scant handful of minutes. Economics 2.0 is itself obsolescent, forced to mutate in a furious survivalist arms race by the arrival of the Slug, an extraterrestrial parasite that preys on new posthuman intelligences by subverting their value systems. Only the name remains as a vague shorthand for merely human-equivalent intelligences to use when describing interactions they don't understand.

The latest generation of posthuman entities is less overtly hostile to humans, but much more alien than the generations of the forties and sixties. Among their less-comprehensible activities, the Vile Offspring are engaged in exploring the phase space of all possible human experiences from the inside out. Perhaps they caught a dose of the Tiplerite heresy along the way, for now a steady stream of resimulant uploads is pouring through the downsystem relays in Titan orbit. The Rapture of the Nerds has been followed by the Resurrection of the Extremely Confused, except that they're not *really* resurrectees—they're simulations based off their originals' recorded histories, blocky and missing chunks of their memories, as bewildered as duckings as they're herded into the wood-chipper of the future.

Sirhan al-Khurasani despises them with the abstract contempt of an antiquarian for a cunning but ultimately transparent forgery. But Sirhan is young, and he's gfot more contempt than he knows what to do with. It's a handy outlet for his frustration. He has a lot to be frustrated at, starting with his intermittently dysfunctional family, the elderly stars around whom his planet whizzes in chaotic trajectories of enthusiasm and distaste.

Sirhan fancies himself a philosopher-historian of the singular age, a chronicler of the incomprehensible, which would be a fine thing to be except that his greatest insights are all derived from the family's antique robot cat. He alternately fawns over and rages against his mother—Amber Macx, one-time queen of the Ring Imperium and now a leading light in the refugee community—and honors (when not attempting to evade the will of) his father—Sadeq al Khurasani, sometime Islamic scholar, theist heretic, and lately a rising philosophical patriarch within the Conservationist faction. He's secretly in awe (not to mention slightly resentful of) of his famous grandfather, Manfred Macx, who usually manifests in the shape of a flock of passenger pigeons, a rain of snails, or something equally unconventional. In fact, Manfred's abrupt reincarnation in the flesh has quite disconcerted Sirhan. And he sometimes listens to his stepgrandmother Annette, who has reincarnated in more or less her original twenty-twenties body after spending some years as a great ape, and who seems to view him as some sort of personal project.

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Only right now, Annette isn't being very helpful, his mother is campaigning on an electoral platform calling for a vote to blow up the world, his grandfather is trying to convince him to entrust everything he holds dear to a rogue lobster, and the cat isn't talking.

And you thought you had problems?

They've transplanted imperial Brussels to Saturn in its entirety, mapped tens of megatons of buildings right down to nanoscale and beamed them into the outer darkness to be reinstantiated down-well on the lilypad colonies that dot the stratosphere of the gas giant. (Eventually, the entire surface of the Earth will follow—after which the Vile Offspring will core the planet like an apple, and dismantle it into a cloud of newly formed quantum nanocomputers to add to their burgeoning Matrioshka brain.) Due to a resource contention problem in the Festival committee's planning algorithm—or maybe it's simply an elaborate joke—Brussels now begins just on the other side of a diamond bubble-wall from the Boston Museum of Science, less than a kilometer away as the passenger pigeon flies. Which is why, when it's time to celebrate a birthday or nameday—meaningless though those concepts are, out on Saturn's synthetic surface—Amber tends to drag people over to the bright lights in the big city.

This time, she's throwing a rather special party. At Annette's canny prompting, she's borrowed the Atomium and invited a horde of guests to a big celebration. It's not a family bash—although Annette's promised her a surprise—so much as a business meeting, testing the water as a preliminary to declaring her candidacy. It's a media event, an attempt to engineer Amber's re-entry into the mainstream politics of the human system.

Sirhan doesn't really want to be here. He's got far more important things to do, like cataloging Aineko's memories of the voyage of the *Field Circus*. He's also collating a series of interviews with re-simulated logical positivists from Oxford, England (the ones who haven't retreated into gibbering near-catatonia upon realizing that their state vectors are all members of the set of all sets that do not contain themselves), when he isn't attempting to establish a sound rational case for his belief that extraterrestrial intelligence is an oxymoron and that the vast network of quantum-entangled Routers that orbit the brown dwarfs of the Milky Way galaxy is just an accident, one of evolution's little pranks.

But Tante Annette twisted his arm, and promised he was in on the surprise if he came to the party. And despite everything, he wouldn't miss being a fly on the wall during the coming meeting between Manfred and Amber for all the tea in China.

Sirhan walks up to the gleaming stainless steel dome that contains the entrance to the Atomium, and waits for the lift. He's in line behind a gaggle of young-looking women, skinny and soigné in cocktail gowns and tiaras lifted from 1920's silent movies. (Annette declared an Age of Elegance theme for the party, knowing full well that it would force Amber to focus on her public appearance.) Sirhan's attention is, however, elsewhere. The various fragments of his mind are conducting three simultaneous interviews with philosophers ("whereof that we cannot speak we

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cannot know" in spades), controlling two bots that are overhauling the museum plumbing and air-recycling system, and he's busy discussing observations of the alien artifact orbiting the brown dwarf Hyundai +4904/-56 with Aineko. What's left of him exhibits about as much social presence as a pickled cabbage.

The elevator arrives and accepts a load of passengers. Sirhan is crowded into one corner by a bubble of high-society laughter and an aromatic puff of smoke from an improbable ivory cigarette holder as the elevator surges, racing up the sixty-meter shaft toward the observation deck at the top of the Atomium. It's a ten meter diameter metal globe, spiral staircases and escalators connecting it to the seven spheres at the corners of an octahedron that make up the former centerpiece of the 1950 World's Fair. Unlike most of the rest of Brussels, it's the original bits and atoms, bent alloy structures from before the space age shipped out to Saturn at enormous expense. The lift arrives with a slight jerk. "Excuse *me*," squeaks one of the good-time girls as she lurches backward, elbowing Sirhan.

He blinks, barely noticing her black bob of hair, chromatophore-tinted shadows artfully tuned around her eyes. "Nothing to excuse." In the background, Aineko is droning on sarcastically about the lack of interest the crew of the *Field Circus* exhibited in the cat's effort to decompile their hitch-hiker, the Slug (an alien entity, or financial instrument, or parasitic pyramid scheme, or something) who had returned to the solar system with them, in return for helping them break free from the feral economic fragments that had captured them in the demilitarized zone on the far side of the Router. It's distracting as hell, but Sirhan feels a desperate urge to understand what happened out there. It's the key to understanding his not-mother's obsessions and weaknesses—which, he senses, will be important in the times to come.

He evades the gaggle of overdressed good-time girls and steps out onto the lower of the two stainless steel decks that bisect the sphere. Accepting a fruit cocktail from a discreetly humanoform waitron, he strolls toward a row of triangular windows that gaze out across the arena toward the American Pavilion and the World Village. The metal walls are braced with turquoise-painted girders, and the perspex transparencies are fogged with age. He can barely see the one-tenth scale model of an atomic powered ocean liner leaving the pier below, or the eight-engined giant seaplane beside it. "They never *once* asked me if the Slug had attempted to map itself into the human-compatible spaces aboard the ship," Aineko bitches at him. "I wasn't expecting them to, but really! Your mother's too trusting, boy."

"I suppose you took precautions?" Sirhan's ghost murmurs to the cat. That sets the irascible metafeline off again on a long discursive tail-washing rant about the unreliability of Economics 2.0-compliant financial instruments. Economics 2.0 apparently replaces the single-indirection layer of conventional money, and the multiple-indirection mappings of options trades, with some kind of insanely baroque object-relational framework based on the parameterized desires and subjective experiential values of the players, and as far as the cat is concerned, this makes all such transactions intrinsically untrustworthy.

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Which is why you're stuck here with us apes, Sirhan-prime cynically notes as he spawns an Eliza ghost to carry on nodding its head politely at the cat while he experiences the party.

It's uncomfortably warm in the Atomium sphere—not surprising, there must be thirty people milling around up here, not counting the waitrons—and several local multicast channels are playing a variety of styles of music to synchronize the mood swings of the revelers to hardcore techno, waltz, raga. . . .

"Having a good time, are we?" Sirhan breaks away from integrating one of his timid philosophers and realizes that his glass is empty and his mother is grinning alarmingly at him over the rim of a cocktail glass containing something that glows in the dark. She's wearing spike-heeled boots and a black velvet cat suit that hugs her contours like a second skin, and she's already getting drunk. In wall-clock years, she is younger than Sirhan; it's like having a bizarrely knowing younger sister mysteriously injected into his life to replace the eigenmother who stayed home and died with the Ring Imperium decades ago. "Look at you, hiding in a corner at my party! Hey, your glass is empty. Want to try this caipirinha? There's someone you've got to meet over here—"

It's at moments like this that Sirhan really wonders what in Jupiter's orbit his father ever saw in this woman. (But then again, in the worldline this instance of her has returned from, he *didn't*. So what does *that* signify?) "As long as there's no fermented grape juice in it," he says resignedly, allowing himself to be led past a gaggle of conversations and a mournful-looking gorilla slurping a long drink through a straw. "More of your *accelerationista* allies?"

"Maybe not." It's the girl-gang he avoided noticing in the lift, their eyes sparkling, really getting into this early twen-cen drag party thing, waving their cigarette holders and cocktail glasses around with wild abandon. "Rita, I'd like you to meet Sirhan, my other fork's son. Sirhan, this is Rita. She's a historian too. Why don't you—"

—Dark eyes, emphasized not by powder or paint but by chromatophores inside her skin cells: black hair, chain of enormous pearls, slim black dress sweeping the floor, a look of mild embarrassment on her heart-shaped face: she could be a dark-haired Audrey Hepburn in any other century— "Didn't I just meet you in the elevator?" The embarrassment shifts to her cheeks, visible now.

Sirhan flushes, unsure how to reply. Just then, an interloper arrives on the scene, pushing in between them. "Are you the curator who reorganized the Precambrian gallery along teleology lines? I've got some things to say about *that!*" The interloper is tall, assertive, and blonde. Sirhan hates her from the first sight of her wagging finger.

"Oh shut up, Marissa, this is a party, you've been being a pain all evening." To his surprise, Rita-the-historian rounds on the interloper angrily.

"It's not a problem," he manages to say. In the back of his mind, something makes the Rogerian puppet-him that's listening to the cat sit up and dump-merge a whole lump of fresh memories into his mind—something important, something about the Vile Offspring sending a starship

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to bring something back from the Router—but the people around him are soaking up so much attention that he has to file it for later.

"Yes it *is* a problem," Rita declares. She points at the interloper, who is saying something about the invalidity of teleological interpretations, trying to justify herself, and says, "*Plonk*. Phew. Where were we?"

Sirhan blinks. Suddenly everyone but him seems to be ignoring that annoying Marissa person. "What just happened?" he asks cautiously.

"I killfiled her. Don't tell me, you aren't running Superplonk yet, are you?" Rita flicks a location-cached idea at him and he takes it cautiously, spawning a couple of specialized Turing oracles to check it for halting states. It seems to be some kind of optic-lobe hack that accesses a collaborative database of eigenfaces, with some sort of side-interface to Broca's region. "Share and enjoy, confrontation-free parties."

"I've never seen—" Sirhan trails off as he loads the module distractedly. (The cat is rambling on about god modules and metastatic entanglement and the difficulty of arranging to have personalities custom-grown to order somewhere in the back of his head, while his fractional-self nods wisely whenever it pauses.) Something like an inner eyelid descends. He looks round: there's a vague blob at one side of the room, making an annoying buzzing sound. His mother seems to be having an animated conversation with it. "That's rather interesting."

"Yes, it helps no end at this sort of event." Rita startles him by taking his left arm in hand—her cigarette holder shrivels and condenses until it's no more than a slight thickening around the wrist of her opera glove—and steers him toward a waitron. "I'm sorry about your foot, earlier, I was a bit overloaded. Is Amber Macx really your mother?"

"Not exactly, she's my eigenmother," he mumbles. "The reincarnated download of the version who went out to Hyundai +4904/-56 aboard the *Field Circus*. She married a French-Algerian confidence-trick analyst instead of my father, but I think they divorced a couple of years ago. My *real* mother married an imam, but they died in the aftermath of Economics 2.0." She seems to be steering him in the direction of the window bay Amber dragged him away from earlier. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you're not very good at making small talk," Rita says quietly, "and you don't seem very good in crowds. Is that right? Was it you who performed that amazing dissection of Wittgenstein's cognitive map? The one with the pre-verbal Gödel string in it?"

"It was—" he clears his throat. "You thought it was amazing?" Suddenly, on impulse, he detaches a ghost to identify this Rita person and find out who she is, what she wants. It's not normally worth the effort to get to know someone more closely than casual small talk, but she seems to have been digging into his background and he wants to know why. Along with the him that's chatting to Aineko that makes about three instances pulling in near-realtime resources. He'll be running up an existential debt soon if he keeps forking ghosts like this.

"I thought so," she says. There's a bench in front of the wall and somehow he finds himself sitting on it next to her. *There's no danger, we're not in private or anything,* he tells himself stiffly. She's smiling at him, face tilted slightly to one side and lips parted, and for a moment a dizzy sense

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of possibility washes over him: *what if she's about to throw all propriety aside? How undignified!* Sirhan believes in self-restraint and dignity. "I was really interested in this—" She passes him another dynamically loadable blob, encompassing a detailed critique of his analysis of Wittgenstein's matriophobia in the context of gendered language constructs and nineteenth-century Viennese society, along with a hypothesis that leaves Sirhan gasping with mild indignation at the very idea that *he* of all people might share Wittgenstein's skewed outlook— "what do you think?" she asks, grinning impishly at him.

"Nnngk." Sirhan tries to unswallow his tongue. Rita crosses her legs, her gown hissing. "I, ah, that is to say—" At which moment his partials re-integrate, dumping a slew of positively pornographic images into his memories. *It's a trap!* they shriek, her breasts and hips and pubes—cleanshaven, he can't help noticing—thrusting at him in hotly passionate abandon, *mother's trying to make you loose like her!* and he remembers what it *would* be like to wake up in bed next to this woman who he barely knows after being married to her for a year, because one of his cognitive ghosts has just spent several seconds of network time (or several subjective months) *getting* hot and sweaty with a ghost of her own, and she *does* have interesting research ideas, even if she's a pushy over-westernized woman who thinks she can run his life for him— "what *is* this?" he splutters, his ears growing hot and his garments constricting.

"Just speculating about possibilities. We could get a lot done together." She snakes an arm round his shoulders and pulls him toward her, gently. "Don't you want to find out if we could work out?"

"But, but—" Sirhan is steaming. *Is she offering casual sex?* he wonders, profoundly embarrassed by his own inability to read her signals. "What do you *want?*" he asks.

"You *do* know that you can do more with superplonk than just killfile annoying idiots?" she whispers in his ear. "We can be invisible right now, if you like. It's great for confidential meetings—other things, too. We can work beautifully together, our ghosts annealed really well. . . ."

Sirhan jumps up, his face stinging, and turns away. "No thank you!" he snaps, angry at himself. "Goodbye!" His other instances, distracted by his broadcast emotional overload, are distracted from their tasks and sputtering with indignation. Her hurt expression is too much for him: the killfile snaps down, blurring her into an indistinct black blob on the wall, veiled by his own brain as he turns and walks away, seething with anger at his mother for being so unfair as to make him behold his own face in the throes of fleshy passion.

Meanwhile, in one of the lower spheres, padded with silvery-blue insulating pillows bound together with duct tape, the movers and shakers of the accelerationista faction are discussing their bid for world power at fractional-C velocities.

"We can't outrun a collapse of the false vacuum," insists Manfred, slightly uncoordinated and slurring his vowels under the influence of the first glass of fruit punch he's experienced in nigh-on twenty realtime years. His body is young and still relatively featureless, hair still growing

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out, and he's abandoned his old no-implants fetish at last to adopt an array of interfaces that let him internalize all the exocortex processes that formerly he ran on an array of dumb Turing machines outside his body. He's standing on his own sense of style and is the only person in the room who isn't wearing some variation of dinner jacket or classical evening dress. "Entangled exchange via Routers is still slower-than-light in absolute terms—any phase change will catch up eventually, the network must have an end. And then where will we be, Sameena?"

"I'm not disputing that." The woman he's talking to, wearing a green-and-gold sari and a medieval maharajah's ransom in gold and natural diamonds, nods thoughtfully. "But it hasn't happened yet, and we've got evidence that superhuman intelligences have been loose in this universe for gigayears, so there's a fair bet that the worst-catastrophe scenarios are unlikely. And looking closer to home, we don't know what the Routers are for, or who made them. Until then. . . ." She shrugs. "Look what happened last time somebody tried to probe them. No offense intended."

"It's already happened. If what I hear is correct, the Vile Offspring aren't nearly as negative about the idea of using the Routers as we old-fashioned metahumans might like to believe." Manfred frowns, trying to recall some hazy anecdote—he's experimenting with a new memory compression algorithm, necessitated by his pack-rat mnemonic habits when younger, and sometimes the whole universe feels as if it's nearly on the tip of his tongue. "So, we seem to be in violent agreement about the need to *know more* about what's going on, and to find out what they're doing out there. We've got cosmic background anisotropies caused by the waste heat from computing processes millions of light years across—it takes a big interstellar civilization to do that, and they don't seem to have fallen into the same rat-trap as the local Matrioshka brain civilizations. And we've got worrying rumors about the Vile Offspring messing around with the structure of spacetime in order to find a way around the Bekenstein bound. If the VO are trying that, then the folks out near the supercluster already know the answers. The best way to find out what's happening is to go and talk to whoever's responsible. Can we at least agree on that?"

"Probably not." Her eyes glitter with amusement. "It all depends on whether one believes in these civilizations in the first place. I *know* your people point to deep-field camera images going all the way back to some wonky hubble-bubble scrying mirror from the late twentieth, but we've got no evidence except some theories about the Casimir effect and pair production and spinning beakers of helium-3—much *less* proof that a whole bunch of alien galactic civilizations are trying to collapse the false vacuum and destroy the universe!" Her voice drops a notch. "At least, not enough proof to convince most people, Manny dear. I know this comes as a shock to you, but not *everyone* is a neophiliac posthuman body-surfer whose idea of a sabbatical is to spend twenty years as a flock of tightly networked seagulls in order to try and to prove the Turing oracle thesis—"

"—Not everyone is concerned with the deep future," Manfred interrupts. "It's important! If we live or die, that doesn't matter—that's not the big picture. The big question is whether information originating in our light cone is preserved, or whether we're stuck in a lossy medium where

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our very existence counts for nothing. It's downright *embarrassing,* to be a member of a species with such a profound lack of curiosity about its own future, especially when it affects us all personally! I mean, if there's going to come a time when there's nobody or nothing to remember us, then what does—"

"Manfred?"

He stops in mid-sentence, his mouth open, staring dumbly.

It's Amber, poised in black cat-suit with cocktail glass. Her expression is open and confused, appallingly vulnerable. Blue liquid slops, almost spilling out of her glass—the rim barely extends itself in time to catch the drops. Behind her stands Annette, a deeply self-satisfied smile on her face.

"You." Amber pauses, her cheek twitching as bits of her mind page in and out of her skull, polling external information sources. "You really *are*—"

A hasty cloud materializes under her hand as her fingers relax, dropping the glass.

"Uh." Manfred stares, at a complete loss for words. "I'd, uh." After a moment, he looks past her. "Why don't you explain?" he asks.

"We thought you could use the good advice," Annette speaks into the awkward silence. "And a family reunion. It was meant to be a surprise."

"A *surprise*." Amber looks perplexed. "You could say that."

"You're taller than I was expecting," Manfred says unexpectedly.

"Yeah?" She looks at him, and he turns his head slightly, facing her. It's an historic moment, and Annette is getting it all on memory diamond, from every angle. The family's dirty little secret is that Amber and her father have *never met,* not face-to-face in physical meat-machine proximity. She was born more than a year after Manfred and Pamela separated, decanted pre-fertilized from a tank of liquid nitrogen to play a pawn's role in a bitter game of divorce chess—promoted to queen by her own initiative in high orbit around Jupiter, extricated from her mother's stifling grip by a legal instrument Manfred smuggled to her inside his cat's brain, but this is the first time either of them have actually seen the other's face without electronic intermediation. And while they've said everything that needed to be said on a businesslike level, anthropoid family politics is still very much a matter of body language and pheromones. "How long have you been out and about?" she asks, trying to disguise her confusion.

"About six hours." Manfred manages a rueful chuckle, trying to take the sight of her in all at once. "Let's get you another drink and put our heads together?"

"Okay." Amber takes a deep breath and glares at Annette. "You set this up, *you* get to clean up the mess."

Annette just stands there, smiling at the confusion of her accomplishment.

The cold light of dawn finds Sirhan angry, sober, and ready to pick a fight with the first person who comes through the door of his office. The room is about ten meters across, with a floor of polished marble and skylights in the intricately plastered ceiling. The walkthrough of his current

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project sprouts in the middle of the floor like a ghostly abstract cauliflower, fractal branches dwindling down to in-folded nodes tagged with compressed identifiers. The branches expand and shrink as Sirhan paces around it, zooming to readability in response to his eyeball dynamics. But he isn't paying it much attention. He's too disturbed, uncertain, trying to work out who to blame. Which is why when the door bangs open his first response is to whirl angrily and open his mouth—then stop. "What do *you* want?" he demands.

"A word, if you please?" Annette looks around distractedly. "This is your project?"

"Yes," he says icily, and banishes the walkthrough with a wave of one hand. "What do you want?"

"I'm not sure." Annette pauses. For a moment, she looks weary, tired beyond mortal words, and Sirhan momentarily wonders if perhaps he's spreading the blame too far. This eighty-something Frenchwoman who is no blood relative, just the love of his scatterbrained grandfather's life, seems the least likely person to be trying to manipulate him, at least in such an unwelcome and intimate manner. But there's no telling. Families are strange things, and even though the current instantiations of his father and mother aren't the ones who ran his pre-adolescent brain through a couple of dozen alternative lifelines before he was ten, he can't be sure that they wouldn't enlist Tante Annette's assistance in fucking with his mind. "We need to talk about your mother," she continues.

"We do? Do we?" Sirhan turns around and sees the vacancy of the room for what it is, a socket, like a pulled tooth, informed as much by what is absent as by what is present. He snaps his fingers and an intricate bench of translucent bluish utility fog congeals out of the air behind him. He sits; Annette can do what she wants.

"Oui." She thrusts her hands deep into the pocket of the peasant smock she's wearing—a major departure from her normal style—and leans against the wall. Physically, she looks young enough to have spent her entire life blitzing around the galaxy at three nines of lightspeed, but her posture is world-weary and ancient. History is a foreign country and the old are unwilling emigrants, tired out by the constant travel. "Your mother, she has taken on a huge job, but it's one that needs doing. *You* agreed it needed doing, years ago, with the archive store. *She* is now trying to get it moving, that is what the campaign is about, to place before the electors a choice of how best to move an entire civilization. So I ask, why do you obstruct her?"

Sirhan works his jaw: he feels like spitting. "*Why?*" He snaps.

"Yes. Why?" Annette gives in and magics up a chair from the swirling fog-bank beneath the ceiling. She crouches in it, staring at him. "It is a question."

"I have nothing against her political machinations," Sirhan says tensely. "But her uninvited interference in my personal life—"

"What interference?"

He stares. "Is that a question?" He's silent for a moment. Then: "Throwing that wanton at me last night—"

Annette stares at him. "Who? What are you talking about?"

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"That, that loose woman!" Sirhan is reduced to spluttering. "False pretenses! If this is one of father's matchmaking ideas, it is so *very* wrong that—"

Annette is shaking her head. "Are you crazy? Your mother simply wanted you to meet her campaign team, to join in planning the policy. Your father is not on this planet! But you stormed out, you *really* upset Rita, did you know that? Rita, she is the best belief-maintenance and story-construction operative I have! Yet you to tears reduce her. What is wrong with you?"

"I—" Sirhan swallows. "She's *what?*" he asks again, his mouth dry. "I thought . . ." he trails off. He doesn't want to say what he thought. The hussy, that brazen trollop, is part of his mother's campaign party? Not some plot to lure him into corruption? What if it was all a horrible misunderstanding?

"I think you need to apologize to someone must," Annette says coolly, standing up. Sirhan's head is spinning between a dozen dialogs of actors and ghosts, a journal of the party replaying before his ghast-stricken inner gaze. Even the walls have begun to flicker, responding to his intense unease. Annette skewers him with a disgusted look. "When you can a woman behave toward as a person, not a threat, we can again talk. Until then." And she stands up and walks out of the room, leaving him to contemplate the shattered stump of his anger, so startled he can barely concentrate on his project, thinking, *is that really me? Is that what I look like to her?* as the cladistic graph slowly rotates before him, denuded branches spread wide, waiting to be filled with the nodes of the alien interstellar network just as soon as he can convince Aineko to stake him the price of the depth-first tour of darkness.

Manfred used to be a flock of pigeons—literally, his exocortex dispersed among a passel of bird-brains, pecking at brightly colored facts, shitting semi-digested conclusions. Being human again feels inexplicably odd. Not only does he get shooting pains in his neck whenever he tries to look over his left shoulder with his right eye, but he's lost the habit of spawning exocortical agents to go interrogate a database or bush robot or something, then report back to him. Instead, he keeps trying to fly off in all directions at once, which usually ends with him falling over.

But right now, that's not a problem. He's sitting comfortably at a weathered wooden table in a beer garden behind a hall lifted from somewhere like Frankfurt, a liter glass of straw-colored liquid at his elbow and a comforting multiple whispering of knowledge streams tickling the back of his head. Most of his attention is focused on Annette, who frowns at him with mingled concern and affection.

"You are going to have to do something about that boy," she says. "He is close enough to upset Amber. And without Amber, there will be a problem."

"I'm going to have to do something about Amber, too," Manfred retorts. "What was the idea, not warning her I was coming?"

"It was meant to be a surprise." Annette comes as close to pouting as Manfred's seen her recently. It brings back warm memories: he reaches out to hold her hand across the table.

"You know I can't handle the human niceties properly when I'm a

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flock." He strokes the back of her wrist. She doesn't pull back. "I expected you to manage all that stuff."

"*That stuff.*" Annette shakes her head. "She's your daughter, you know? Did you have no curiosity left?"

"As a *bird?*" Manfred cocks his head to one side so abruptly that he hurts his neck and winces. "Nope. *Now* I do, but I think I pissed her off—"

"Which brings us back to point one."

"I'd send her an apology, but she'd think I was trying to manipulate her," Manfred takes a mouthful of beer. "And she'd be right."

"So? Don't brood." Annette pulls her hand back. "Something will sort itself out. Before the electoral problem becomes acute." When she's around him, the remains of her once-strong French accent almost vanish in a trans-Atlantic drawl, he realizes with a pang. He's been abhuman for too long—people who meant a lot to him have changed while he's been away.

"That's the trouble with this damned polity." Manfred takes another gulp of *hefeweisen*. "We've already got six million people living on this planet, and it's growing like the first generation internet. Everyone who is anyone knows everyone, but there are so many incomers diluting the mix and not knowing that there *is* a small-world network here that everything is up for grabs again after only a couple of megaseconds. New networks form, and we don't even know they exist until they sprout a political agenda and surface under us. We're acting under time pressure. If we don't get things rolling now, we'll never be able to . . ." He shakes his head. "It wasn't like this for you in Brussels, was it?"

"No. Brussels was a mature system. And it will only get worse from here on in, I think."

"Democracy 2.0." He shudders briefly. "Do you think we can make this fly?"

"I don't see why not. If Amber's willing to play the People's Princess for us . . ." Annette picks up a slice of liverwurst and chews on it meditatively.

"I'm not sure it's workable, however we play it." Manfred looks thoughtful. "The whole democratic participation thing looks questionable to me under these circumstances. We're under direct threat, for all that it's a long-term one, and this whole culture is in danger of turning into a classical nation-state. Or worse, several of them layered on top of one another with complete geographical colocation but no social interpenetration. I'm not certain it's a good idea to try to steer something like that—pieces might break off, you'd get the most unpleasant side-effects. Although, on the other hand, if we can mobilize enough broad support to become the first visible planet-wide polity . . ."

"We need you to stay focused," Annette adds unexpectedly.

"Focused? *Me?*" He laughs, briefly. "I *used* to have an idea a second. Now it's maybe one a year."

"Yes, but you know the old saying? The fox has many ideas—the hedgehog has only one, but it's a *big* idea."

"So tell me, what is my big idea?" Manfred leans forward, one elbow on the table, one eye focused on innerspace as a hot-burning thread of consciousness barks psephological performance metrics at him, analyzing the game ahead. "Where do you think I'm going?"

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"I think—" Annette breaks off suddenly, staring past his shoulder. Privacy slips, and for a frozen moment Manfred glances round in mild horror and sees thirty or forty other guests in the crowded garden, elbows rubbing, voices raised above the background chatter. "Gianni!" She beams widely as she stands up. "What a surprise! When did you arrive?"

Manfred blinks. A slim young man, moving with adolescent grace but none of the awkward movements and sullen lack of poise—he's much older than he looks, chickenhawk genetics. *Gianni?* He feels a huge surge of memories paging through his exocortex. He remembers ringing a doorbell in dusty, hot Rome: white toweling bathrobe, the economics of scarcity, autograph signed by the dead hand of Von Neumann— "Gianni?" he asks. "It's been a long time!"

The gilded youth, incarnated in the image of a metropolitan toy-boy from the noughties, grins widely and slides down onto the bench next to Annette, whom he kisses with easy familiarity. "Manfred! So charmed!" He glances round curiously. "Ah, how very Bavarian." He snaps his fingers. "Mine will be a, what do you recommend? It's been too long since my last beer." His grin widens. "Not in this body."

"You're re-simulated?" Manfred asks, unable to stop himself.

Annette frowns at him disapprovingly. "No, silly! He came through the teleport gate—"

"Oh." Manfred shakes his head. "I'm sorry—"

"It's okay." Gianni Vittoria clearly doesn't mind being mistaken for a historical newbie, rather than someone who's traveled through the decades the hard way. *He must be over a hundred by now,* Manfred notes, not bothering to spawn a search thread to find out.

"It was time to move, and, well, the old body didn't want to move with me, so why not go gracefully and accept the inevitable?"

"I didn't take you for a dualist," Manfred says ruefully.

"Ah, I'm not—but neither am I reckless." Gianni drops his grin for a moment. The sometime minister for transhuman affairs, economic theoretician, and then retired tribal elder of the polycognitive liberals is serious. "I have never uploaded before, or switched bodies, or teleported. Even when my old one was seriously—tcha! Maybe I left it too long. But here I am, one planet is as good as another to be cloned and downloaded onto, don't you think?"

"You invited him?" Manfred asks Annette.

"Why wouldn't I?" There's a wicked gleam in her eye. "Did you expect me to live like a nun while you were a flock of pigeons? We may have campaigned against the legal death of the transubstantiated, Manfred, but there are limits."

Manfred looks between them, then shrugs, embarrassed. "I'm still getting used to being human again," he admits. "Give me time to catch up? At an emotional level, at least." He focuses on Gianni. "I have a feeling I'm here for a purpose, and it isn't mine," he says slowly. "Why don't you tell me what you've got in mind?"

Gianni shrugs. "You have the big picture already. We are human, metahuman, and augmented human. But the *posthumans* are things that were never really human to begin with. Our mind children have

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reached their adolescence as a civilization in their own right, and the Vile Offspring want the place to themselves so they can throw a party. The writing is, as they say, on the wall: we frail mortals might wish to move to a neighborhood where the youth is less raucous and maybe less inclined to accidentally converts our planets into computronium. Don't you think?"

Manfred gives him a long stare. "The whole idea of running away in meatspace is fraught with peril," he says slowly. He picks up his mug of beer and swirls it around slowly. "Look. We know, now, that a singularity doesn't turn into a voracious predator that eats all the dumb matter in its path, triggering a phase change in the structure of space—at least, not unless they've done something very stupid to the structure of the false vacuum, somewhere outside our current light cone. Bandwidth limits the singularity, motivating the fast-thinkers to stay as close to the core of their civilization as they can. *Usually*. That's what we've seen in the local neighborhood.

"But if we run away, *we* are still going to be there. Sooner or later we'll have the same problem all over again; runaway intelligence augmentation, self-expression, engineered intelligences, whatever. Possibly that's what happened out past the Boötes void—not a galactic-scale civilization, but a race of pathological cowards fleeing their own exponential transcendence. We carry the seeds of a singularity with us wherever we go, and if we try to excise those seeds, we cease to be human, don't we? So . . . maybe you can tell me what you think we should do. Hmm?"

"It's a dilemma." A waitron inserts itself into their privacy-screened field of view. It plants a spun-diamond glass in front of Gianni, then pukes beer into it. Manfred declines a refill, waiting for Gianni to drink. "Ah, the simple pleasures of the flesh! I've been corresponding with your daughter, Manny. She loaned me her experiential digest of the journey to Hyundai +4904/-56. I found it quite alarming. Nobody's casting aspersions on her observations, not after that self-propelled stock market bubble or 419 scam or whatever it was got loose in the Economics 2.0 sphere, but the implications—the Vile Offspring will eat the solar system, Manny. Then they'll slow down. But where does that leave *us,* I ask you? What is there for orthohumans like us to do if what is essentially a non-human civilization of level II on the Kardashev scale—full control over the entire energy output of a star, full computational utilization of the resources of a solar system—decides it wants to recycle our mass?"

Manfred nods thoughtfully. "You've heard the argument between the accelerationistas and the time-binder faction, I assume?" he asks.

"Of course." Gianni takes a long pull on his beer. "What do *you* think of our options?"

"The accelerationistas want to upload everyone onto a fleet of starwhisps and charge off to colonize an uninhabited brown dwarf planetary system. Or maybe steal a Matrioshka brain that's succumbed to senile dementia and turn it back into planetary biomes with cores of diamond-phase computronium to fulfill some kind of demented pastoralist nostalgia trip. Rousseau's universal robots. I gather Amber thinks this is a good idea because she's done it before—at least, the charging off aboard a star-

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whisp part. 'To boldly go where no uploaded metahuman colony fleet has gone before' has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?" Manfred nods to himself. "Like I say, it won't work. We'd be right back to iteration one of the waterfall model of singularity formation within a couple of gigaseconds of arriving. That's why I came back: to warn her."

"So." Gianni prods, pretending to ignore the frowns that Annette is casting his way.

"And as for the time-binders." Manfred nods again. "They're like Sirhan. Deeply conservative, deeply suspicious. Holding out for staying here as long as possible, until the Vile Offspring come for Saturn—then moving out bit by bit, into the Kuiper belt. Colony habitats on snowballs half a light year from anywhere." He shudders. "Spam in a fucking can with a light-hour walk to the nearest civilized company if your fellow inmates decide to reinvent Stalinism or Objectivism. No thanks! I know they've been muttering about quantum teleportation and stealing toys from the Routers, but I'll believe it when I see it."

"Which leaves *what?*" Annette demands. "It is all very well, this dismissal of both the accelerationista and time-binder programs, Manny, but what can *you* propose in their place?" She looks distressed. "Fifty years ago, you would have had six new ideas before breakfast! *And* an erection."

Manfred leers at her unconvincingly. "Who says I can't still have both?"

She glares. "Drop it!"

"Okay." Manfred chugs back a quarter of a liter of beer, draining his glass, and puts it down on the table with a bang. "As it happens, I *do* have an alternative idea." He looks serious. "I've been discussing it with Aineko for some time, and Aineko has been seeding Sirhan with it—if it's to work optimally, we'll need to get a rump constituency of both the accelerationistas and the conservatives on board. Which is why I'm conditionally going along with this whole election nonsense. So. What's it worth to you for me to explain it?"

"So, who was the deadhead you were busy with today?" asks Amber.

Rita shrugs. "Some boringly prolix pulp author from the early twentieth, with a body phobia of extropian proportions—I kept expecting him to start drooling and rolling his eyes if I crossed my legs. Funny thing is, he was also close to bolting from fear once I mentioned implants. We *really* need to nail down how to deal with these mind/body dualists, don't we?" She watches Amber with something approaching admiration; she's new to the inner circle of the accelerationista study faction, and Amber's social credit is sky-high. Rita's got a lot to learn from her, if she can get close enough. And right now, following her along a path through the landscaped garden behind the museum, seems like a golden moment of opportunity.

Amber smiles. "I'm glad I'm not processing immigrants these days, most of them are so stupid it drives you up the wall after a bit. Personally I blame the Flynn effect—in reverse. They come from a background of sensory deprivation. It's nothing that a course of neural growth enhancers can't fix in a year or two, but after the first few you skullfuck, they're all the same. So *dull*. Unless you're unlucky enough to get one of

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the documentees from a puritan religious period. I'm no fluffragette, but I swear if I get one more superstitious woman-hating clergyman, I'm going to consider prescribing forcible gender reassignment surgery. At least the Victorian English are mostly just open-minded lechers, when you get past their social reserve. And they like new technology."

Rita nods. *Woman-hating etcetera . . .* the echoes of patriarchy are still with them today, it seems, and not just in the form of re-simulated Ayatollahs and Archbishops from the dark ages. "My author sounds like the worst of both. Some guy called Howard, from Rhode Island. Kept looking at me as if he was afraid I was going to sprout bat-wings and tentacles or something." *Like your son,* she doesn't add. *Just what was he thinking, anyway?* she wonders. *To be that screwed up takes serious dedication. . . .* "What are you working on, if you don't mind me asking?" she asks, trying to change the direction of her attention.

"Oh, pressing the flesh, I guess. Auntie 'Nette wanted me to meet some old political hack contact of hers who she figures can help with the program, but he was holed up with her and Dad all day." She pulls a face. "I had another fitting session with the image merchants, they're trying to turn me into a political catwalk clothes-horse. Then there's the program demographics again. We're getting about a thousand new immigrants a day, planet-wide, but it's accelerating rapidly and we should be up to eighty an hour by the time of the election. Which is going to be a huge problem, because if we start campaigning too early, a quarter of the electorate won't know what they're meant to be voting about."

"Maybe it's deliberate," Rita suggests. "The Vile Offspring are trying to rig the outcome by injecting voters." She pings a smiley emoticon off Wednesday's open channel, raising a flickering grin in return. "The party of fuckwits will win, no question about it."

"Uh-huh." Amber snaps her fingers and pulls an impatient face as she waits for a passing cloud to solidify above her head and lower a glass of cranberry juice to her. "Dad said one thing that's spot-on, we're framing this entire debate in terms of what we should do to avoid conflict with the Offspring. The main bone of contention is how to run away and how far to go and which program to put resources into, not *whether* or *when* to run, let alone what else we could do. Maybe we should have given it some more thought. Are we being manipulated?"

Rita looks vacant for a moment. "Is that a question?" she asks. Amber nods, and she shakes her head. "Then I'd have to say that I don't know. The evidence is inconclusive, so far. But I'm not really happy. The Offspring won't tell us what they want, but there's no reason to believe they don't know what *we* want. I mean, they can think rings round us, can't they?"

Amber shrugs, then pauses to unlatch a hedge-gate that gives admission to a maze of sweet-smelling shrubs. "I really don't know. They may not care about us, or even remember we exist—the resimulants may be being generated by some autonomic mechanism, not really part of the higher consciousness of the Offspring. Or it may be some whacked-out post-Tiplerite meme that's gotten hold of more processing resources than the entire pre-singularity net, some kind of MetaMormon project directed

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at ensuring that everyone who can possibly ever have lived lives in the *right way* to fit some weird quasi-religious requirement we don't know about. Or it might be a message we're simply not smart enough to decode. That's the trouble. We don't know."

She vanishes around the curve of the maze. Rita hurries to catch up, sees her about to turn into another alleyway, and leaps after her. "What else?" she pants.

"Could be—" left turn— "*anything,* really." Six steps lead down into a shadowy tunnel: fork right, five meters forward, then six steps up lead back to the surface. "Question is, why don't they—" left turn— "just *tell* us what they want?"

"Speaking to tapeworms." Rita manages to nearly catch up with Amber, who is trotting through the maze as if she's memorized it perfectly. "That's how much the nascent Matrioshka brain can out-think us by, as humans to segmented worms. Would we do. What they told us?"

"Maybe." Amber stops dead, and Rita glances around. They're in an open cell near the heart of the maze, five meters square, hedged in on all sides. There are three entrances and a slate altar, waist high, lichen stained with age. "I think you know the answer to that question."

"I—" Rita stares at her.

Amber stares back, eyes dark and intense. "You're from one of the Ganymede orbitals by way of Titan. You knew my eigensister while I was out of the solar system flying a diamond the size of a Coke can. That's what you told me. You've got a skill set that's a perfect match for the campaign research group, and you asked me to introduce you to Sirhan, then you pushed his buttons like a pro. Just what *are* you trying to pull? Why should I trust you?"

"I—" Rita's face crumples. "I *didn't* push his buttons! He *thought* I was trying to drag him into bed." She looks up defiantly. "I wasn't, I want to learn, what makes you—him—work." Huge dark structured information queries batter at her exocortex, triggering warnings. Someone is churning through distributed time-series databases all over the outer system, measuring her past with a micrometer. She stares at Amber, mortified and angry. It's the ultimate denial of trust, the need to check her statements against the public record for truth. "What are you doing?"

"I have a suspicion." Amber stands poised, as if ready to run—*run away from me?* Rita thinks, startled. "You said, what if the resimulants came from a subconscious function of the Offspring? And funnily enough, I've been discussing that possibility with Dad. He's still got the spark when you show him a problem, you know."

"I don't understand!"

"No, I don't think you do," says Amber, and Rita can feel vast stresses in the space around her: the whole ubicomp environment, dust-sized chips and utility fog and hazy clouds of diamond-bright optical processors in the soil and the air and her skin, is growing blotchy and sluggish, thrashing under the load of whatever Amber—with her management-grade ackles—is ordering it to do. For a moment, Rita can't feel half her mind, and she gets the panicky claustrophobic sense of being trapped inside her own head: then it stops.

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"Tell me!" Rita insists. "What are you trying to prove? It's some mistake—" And Amber is nodding, much to her surprise, looking weary and morose. "What do you think I've done?"

"Nothing. You're coherent. Sorry about that."

"Coherent?" Rita hears her voice rising with her indignation as she feels bits of herself, cut off from her for whole seconds, shivering with relief. "I'll give you coherent! Assaulting my exocortex—"

"Shut up." Amber rubs her face and simultaneously throws Rita one end of an encrypted channel.

"Why should I?" Rita demands, not accepting the handshake.

"Because." Amber glances round. *She's scared!* Rita suddenly realizes. "Just *do* it," she hisses.

Rita accepts the endpoint, and a huge lump of undigested expository data slides down it, structured and tagged with entrypoints and metainformation directories pointing to—

"Holy *shit,*" she whispers, as she realizes what it is.

"Yes." Amber grins humorlessly. She continues, over the open channel: **It looks like they're cognitive antibodies, generated by the devil's own semiotic immune system. That's what Sirhan is focusing on, how to avoid triggering them and bringing everything down at once. Forget the election, we're going to be in deep shit sooner rather than later and we're still trying to work out how to survive. Now are you sure you still want in?**

"Want in on *what?*" Rita asks, shakily.

The lifeboat Dad's trying to get us all into under cover of the accelerationista/-conservationista split, before the Vile Offspring's immune system figures out how to lever us apart into factions and make us kill each other. . . .

Welcome to the afterglow of the intelligence supernova, little tapeworm.

Tapeworms have on the order of a thousand neurons, pulsing furiously to keep their little bodies twitching. Human beings have on the order of a hundred billion neurons. What is happening in the inner solar system as the Vile Offspring churn and reconfigure the fast-thinking structured dust clouds that were once planets is as far beyond the ken of merely human consciousness as the thoughts of a Gödel are beyond the twitching tropisms of a worm. Personality modules bound by the speed of light, sucking down billions of times the processing power of a human brain, form and reform in the halo of glowing nanoprocessors that shrouds the sun in a ruddy glowing cloud.

Mercury, Venus, Mars, Ceres, and the asteroids—all gone. Luna is a silvery iridescent sphere, planed smooth down to micrometer heights, luminous with diffraction patterns. Only Earth, the cradle of human civilization, remains untransformed: and Earth, too, will be dismantled soon enough, for already a trellis of space elevators webs the planet around its equator, lifting refugee dumb matter into orbit and flinging it at the wildlife preserves of the outer system.

The intelligence bloom that gnaws at Jupiter's moons with claws of

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molecular machinery won't stop until it runs out of dumb matter to convert into computronium. By the time it does, it will have as much brain power as you'd get if you placed a planet with a population of six billion future-shocked primates in orbit around every star in the Milky Way galaxy. But right now, it's still stupid, having converted barely a percentage point of the mass of the solar system—it's a mere Magellanic Cloud civilization, infantile and unsubtle and still perilously close to its carbon-chemistry roots.

It's hard for tapeworms living in warm intestinal mulch to wrap their thousand-neuron brains around whatever it is that the vastly more complex entities who host them are discussing, but one thing's sure—the owners have a lot of things going on, not all of them under conscious control. The churning of gastric secretions and the steady ventilation of lungs are incomprehensible to the simple brains of tapeworms, but they serve the purpose of keeping the humans alive and provide the environment the worms live in. And other more esoteric functions contribute to survival—the intricate dance of specialized cloned lymphocytes in their bone marrow and lymph nodes, the random permutations of antibodies constantly churning for possible matches to intruder molecules warning of the presence of pollution, it's all going on beneath the level of conscious control.

Autonomic defenses. Antibodies. Intelligence bloom gnawing at the edges of the outer system. And humans are not as unsophisticated as mulch wrigglers, they can see the writing on the wall. Is it any surprise that among the ones who look outward, the real debate is not over whether to run, but over how far and how *fast?*

There's a team meeting early the next morning. It's still dark outside, and most of the attendees who're present in vivo have the faintly haggard look that comes from abusing melatonin antagonists. Rita stifles a yawn as she glances around the conference room—the walls expanded into huge virtual spaces to accommodate thirty or so exocortical ghosts from sleeping partners who will wake with memories of a particularly vivid lucid dream—and sees Amber talking to her famous father and a younger-looking man who one of her partials recognizes as a last-century EU politician. There seems to be some tension.

Now that Amber has granted Rita her conditional trust, a whole new tier of campaigning information has opened up to her inner eye—stuff steganographically concealed in a hidden layer of the project's collective memory space. There's stuff in here she hadn't suspected, frightening studies of resimulant demographics, surveys of emigration rates from the inner system, cladistic trees dissecting different forms of crude tampering that have been found skulking in the wetware of refugees. The reason why Amber and Manfred and—reluctantly—Sirhan are fighting for one radical faction in a planet-wide election, despite their various misgivings over the validity of the entire concept of democracy in this posthuman era. She blinks it aside, slightly bewildered, forking a couple of dozen personality subthreads to chew on it at the edges. "Need coffee," she mutters to the table as it offers her a chair.

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"Everyone online?" asks Manfred. "Then I'll begin." He looks tired and worried, physically youthful but showing the full weight of his age. "We've got a crisis coming, folks. About a hundred kiloseconds ago, the bit rate on the re-simulation stream jumped. We're now fielding about one resimulated state vector a second, on top of the legitimate immigration we're dealing with. If it jumps again by the same factor, it's going to swamp our ability to check the immigrants for zimboes in vivo—we'd have to move to running them in secure storage or just resurrecting them blind, and if there *are* any jokers in the pack, that's about the riskiest thing we could do."

"Why do you not spool them to memory diamond?" asks the handsome young ex-politician to his left, looking almost amused—as if he already knows the answer.

"Politics." Manfred shrugs.

"It would blow a hole in our social contract," says Amber, looking as if she's just swallowed something unpleasant, and Rita feels a flicker of admiration for the way they're stage-managing the meeting. Amber's even talking to her father, as if she feels comfortable with him around, although he's a walking reminder of her own lack of success. Nobody else has gotten a word in yet. "If we don't instantiate them, the next logical step is to deny re-simulated minds the franchise. Which in turn puts us on the road to institutional inequality. And that's a very big step to take, even if you have misgivings about the idea of settling complex policy issues on the basis of a popular vote, because our whole polity is based on the idea that less competent intelligences—us—deserve consideration."

"Hrmph." Someone clears their throat. Rita glances round and freezes, because it's Amber's screwed-up eigenchild, and he's just about materialized in the chair next to her. *So he adopted superplonk after all?* she observes cynically. He doggedly avoids looking at her. "That was my analysis," he says reluctantly. "We need them alive. For the ark option, at least, and if not, even the accelerationista platform will need them on hand later."

Concentration camps, thinks Rita, trying to ignore Sirhan's presence near her, for it's a constant irritant, *where most of the inmates are confused, frightened human beings—and the ones who aren't* think *they are.* It's an eerie thought, and she spawns a couple of full ghosts to dream it through for her, gaming the possible angles.

"How are your negotiations over the lifeboat designs going?" Amber asks her father. "We need to get a portfolio of design schemata out before we go into the election—"

"Change of plan." Manfred hunches forward. "This doesn't need to go any further, but Sirhan and Aineko have come up with something interesting." He looks worried.

Sirhan is staring at his eigenmother with narrowed eyes, and Rita has to resist the urge to elbow him savagely in the ribs. She knows enough about him now to realize it wouldn't get his attention—at least, not the way she'd want it, not for the right reasons—and, in any case, he's more wrapped up in himself than her ghost ever saw him as likely to be. (How *anyone* could be party to such a detailed exchange of simulated lives and still reject the opportunity to do it in real life is beyond her: unless it's an artifact of his youth, when his parents pushed him through a dozen sim-

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ulated childhoods in search of knowledge and ended up with a stubborn oyster-head of a son. . . .) "We still need to look as if we're planning on using a lifeboat," he says aloud. "There's the small matter of the price they're asking in return for the alternative."

"What? What are you talking about?" Amber sounds confused. "I thought you were working on some kind of cladistic map. What's this about a price?"

Sirhan smiles coolly. "I *am* working on a cladistic map. In a manner of speaking. You wasted much of your opportunity when you journeyed to the Router, you know. I've been talking to Aineko."

"You—" Amber flushes. "What about?" She's visibly angry, Rita notices. Sirhan is needling his eigenmother. *Why?*

"About the topology of some rather interesting types of small-world network." Sirhan leans back in his chair, watching the cloud above her head. "And the Router. You went through it, then you came back with your tail between your legs as fast as you could, didn't you? Not even checking your passenger to see if it was a hostile parasite."

"I don't have to take this," Amber says tightly. "You weren't there and you have no idea what constraints we were working under."

"Really?" Sirhan raises an eyebrow. "Anyway, you missed an opportunity. We know that the Routers—for whatever reason—are self-replicating. They spread from brown dwarf to brown dwarf, hatch, tap the protostar for energy and material, and send a bunch of children out. Von Neumann machines, in other words. We also know that they provide high-bandwidth lightspeed communications to other Routers. When you went through the one at Hyundai +4904/-56, you ended up in an unmaintained DMZ attached to an alien Matrioshka brain that had degenerated, somehow. It follows that *someone* had collected a Router and carried it home, to link into the MB. So why didn't *you* bring one home with you?"

Amber glares at him. "Total payload on board the *Field Circus* was about ten grams. How large do you think a Router seed is?"

"So you brought the Slug home instead, occupying maybe half your storage capacity, and ready to wreak seven shades of havoc on—"

"Children!" They both look round automatically. It's Annette, Rita realizes, and she doesn't look amused. "Why do you not save this bickering for later?" she asks. "We have our own goals to be pursuing." Unamused is an understatement. Annette is fuming.

"This charming family reunion was *your* idea, I believe?" Manfred smiles at her, then nods coolly at the retread EU politician in the next seat.

"Please." It's Amber. "Dad, can you save this for later?" Rita sits up. For a moment, Amber looks ancient, far older than her subjective gigasecond of age. "She's right. She didn't mean to screw up. Let's leave the family history for some time when we can work it out in private. Okay?"

Manfred looks abashed. He blinks rapidly. "All right." He takes a breath. "Amber, I brought some old acquaintances into the loop. If we win the election, then to get out of here as fast as possible, we'll have to use a combination of the two main ideas we've been discussing: spool as many people as possible into high density storage until we get somewhere with space and mass and energy to reincarnate them, and get our hands on a

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Router. The entire planetary polity can't afford to pay the energy budget of a relativistic starship big enough to hold everyone, even as uploads, and a sub-relativistic ship would be too damn vulnerable to the Vile Offspring. And it follows that instead of taking pot luck on the destination, we should learn about the network protocols the Routers use, figure out some kind of transferable currency we can use to pay for our reinstantiation with at the other end, and also how to make some kind of map so we know where we're going. The two hard parts are getting at or to a Router, and paying—that's going to mean traveling with someone who understands Economics 2.0 but doesn't want to hang around the Vile Offspring.

"As it happens, some old acquaintances of mine went out and fetched back a Router seed, for their own purposes. It's sitting about thirty light-hours away from here, out in the Kuiper belt. They're trying to hatch it right now. And I *think* Aineko might be willing to go with us and handle the trade negotiations." He raises the palm of his right hand and flips a bundle of tags into the shared spatial cache of the inner circles' memories.

Lobsters. Decades ago, back in the dim wastelands of the depression-ridden naughty oughties when Manfred was getting going as an agalmic entrepreneur, the uploaded lobsters had escaped onto the net and taken over a dodgy software users group in Moscow. Manfred brokered a deal whereby they'd get their very own cometary factory colony, in return for providing intelligent direction to a bunch of robot machine tools owned by the Franklin trust. Years later, Amber's expedition to the alien artifact known as the Router had run into eerie zombie lobsters, upload ghosts that had been taken over and reanimated by surprisingly stupid scavenger memes. But where the *real* lobsters had gotten to. . . .

For a moment, Rita sees herself hovering in darkness and vacuum, the distant siren-song of a planetary gravity well far below. Off to her—left? north?—glows a hazy dim red cloud the size of the full moon as seen from Earth, a cloud that hums with a constant background noise, the waste heat of a galactic civilization dreaming furious colorless thoughts to itself. Then she figures out how to slew her unblinking, eyeless viewpoint around, and sees the craft.

It's a starship in the shape of a crustacean three kilometers long. It's segmented and flattened, with legs projecting from the abdominal floor to stretch stiffly sideways and clutch fat balloons of cryogenic deuterium fuel. The blue metallic tail is a flattened fan wrapped around the delicate stinger of a fusion reactor. Near the head, things are different: no huge claws here, but the delicately branching fuzz of bush robots, nanoassemblers poised ready to repair damage in flight and spin the parachute of a ramscoop when the ship is ready to decelerate. The head is massively armored against the blitzkrieg onslaught of interstellar dust, its radar eyes a glint of hexagonal compound surfaces staring straight at her.

Behind and below the lobster-ship, a planetary ring looms vast and tenuous. The lobster is in orbit around Saturn, mere light seconds away. And as Rita stares at the ship in dumbstruck silence, it *winks* at her.

"They don't have names, at least not as individual identifiers," Manfred says apologetically, "so I asked if he'd mind being called something. He said Blue, because he is. So I give you the good lobster *Something Blue*."

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Sirhan interrupts, "You still need my cladistics project." He sounds somewhat smug. "To find your way through the network. Do you have a specific destination in mind?"

"Yeah, to both questions," Manfred admits. "We need to send duplicate ghosts out to each possible Router endpoint, wait for an echo, then iterate and repeat. Recursive depth-first traversal. The goal—that's harder." He points at the ceiling, which dissolves into a chaotic three-D spiderweb that Rita recognizes, after some hours of subjective head-down archive time, as a map of the dark matter distribution throughout a radius of a billion light years, galaxies glued like fluff to the nodes where strands of drying silk meet. "We've known for most of a century that there's something weird going on out there, out past the Boötes void—there are a couple of galactic superclusters, around which there's something flaky about the cosmic background anisotropy. Most computational processes generate entropy as a by-product, and it looks like something is dumping waste heat into the area from all the galaxies in the region, very evenly spread in a way that mirrors the metal distribution in those galaxies, except at the very cores. And according to the lobsters, who have been indulging in some *very* long baseline interferometry, most of the stars in the nearest cluster are redder than expected, and metal-depleted. As if someone's been mining them."

"Ah." Sirhan stares at his grandfather. "Why should they be any different from the local nodes?"

"Look around you. Do you see any indications of large-scale cosmic engineering within a million light years of here?" Manfred shrugs. "Locally, nothing has quite reached . . . well. We can guess at the life-cycle of a post-spike civilization now, can't we? We've felt the elephant. We've seen the wreckage of collapsed Matrioshka minds. We know how unattractive exploration is to post-singularity intelligences, we've seen the bandwidth gap that keeps them at home." He points at the ceiling. "But over *there,* something *different* happened. They're making changes on the scale of an entire galactic supercluster, and they appear to be coordinated. They *did* get out and go places, and their descendants may still be out there. It looks like they're doing something purposeful and organized, something vast—a timing channel attack on the virtual machine that's running the universe, perhaps, or an embedded simulation of an entirely different universe. Up or down, is it turtles all the way, or is there something out there that's more real than we are? And don't you think it's worth trying to find out?"

"No." Sirhan crosses his arms. "Not particularly. I'm interested in saving people from the Vile Offspring, not taking a huge gamble on mystery transcendent aliens who may have built a galaxy-sized reality-hacking machine a billion years ago. I'll sell you my services, and even send a ghost along, but if you expect me to bet my entire future on it . . ."

It's too much for Rita. Diverting her attention away from the dizzying innerspace vista, she elbows Sirhan in the ribs. He looks round blankly for a moment, then with gathering anger as he lets his killfile filter slip. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," she hisses. Then succumbing to a secondary impulse she knows she'll regret later, she drops a private channel into his public in-tray.

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"Nobody's asking you to," Manfred is saying defensively, arms crossed. "I view this as a Manhattan Project kind of thing, pursue all agendas in parallel, if we win the election we'll have the resources we need to do that. We should *all* go through the Router, and we will *all* leave backups aboard *Something Blue. Blue* is *slow,* tops out at about a tenth of cee, but what he can do is get a sufficient quantity of memory diamond the hell out of circumsolar space before the Vile Offspring's autonomic defenses activate whatever kind of trust exploit they're planning in the next few megaseconds—"

"*What do you want?*" Sirhan demands angrily over the channel. He's still not looking at her, and not just because he's focusing on the vision in blue that dominates the shared space of the team meeting.

"*Stop lying to yourself,*" Rita sends back. "*You're lying about your own goals and motivations.* You *may not want to know the truth your own ghost worked out, but* I *do. And I'm not going to let you deny it happened.*"

"*So one of your agents seduced a personality image of me—*"

"*Bullshit—*"

"—Do you mean to declare this platform openly?" asks the young-old guy near the platform, the Europol. "Because if so, you're going to undermine Amber's campaign—"

"That's all right," Amber says tiredly, "I'm used to Dad 'supporting' me in his own inimitable way."

"Is okay," says a new voice. "I are happy wait-state grazing in ecliptic." It's the friendly lobster lifeboat, light-lagged by its trajectory outside the ring system.

"*—You're happy to hide behind a hypocritical sense of moral purity when it makes you feel you can look down on other people, but underneath it you're just like everyone else—*"

"—She *set you up to corrupt me, didn't she? You're just bait in her scheme—*"

"The idea was to store incremental backups in the panuliran's cargo cache in case a weakly godlike agency from the inner system attempts to activate the antibodies they've already disseminated throughout the festival culture," Annette explains, stepping in on Manfred's behalf.

Nobody else in the discussion space seems to notice that Rita and Sirhan are busy ripping the shit out of each other over a private channel, throwing emotional hand grenades back and forth like seasoned divorcees. "It's not a satisfactory solution to the evacuation question, but it ought to satisfy the conservatives' baseline requirement, and as insurance—"

"*—That's right, blame your eigenmother! Has it occurred to you that she doesn't care enough about you to try a stunt like that? I think you spent too much time with that crazy grandmother of yours. You didn't even integrate that ghost, did you? Too afraid of polluting yourself! I bet you never even bothered to check what it felt like from inside—*"

"*—I did—*" Sirhan freezes for a moment, personality modules paging in and out of his brain like a swarm of angry bees— "*make a fool of myself,*" he adds quietly, then slumps back in his seat. "*This is* so *embarrassing. . . .*" He covers his face with his hands. "*You're right.*"

"*I am?*" Rita's puzzlement slowly gives way to understanding; Sirhan

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has finally integrated the memories from the partials they hybridized earlier. Stuck-up and proud, the cognitive dissonance must be enormous. "*No I'm not. You're just overly defensive.*"

"*I'm*—" Embarrassed. Because Rita knows him, inside-out. Has the ghost-memories of six months in a simspace with him, playing with ideas, exchanging intimacies, later confidences. She holds ghost-memories of his embrace, a smoky affair that might have happened in realspace if his instant reaction to realizing that it *could* happen hadn't been to dump the splinter of his mind that was contaminated by impure thoughts to cold storage and to deny everything.

"We have no threat profile yet," Annette says, cutting right across their private conversation. "If there *is* a direct threat—and we don't even know that for sure, yet, the Vile Offspring might be enlightened enough to simply be leaving us alone—it'll probably be some kind of subtle attack directed at the foundations of our identity. Look for a credit bubble, distributed trust metrics devaluing suddenly as people catch some kind of weird religion, something like that. Maybe a perverse election outcome. And it won't be sudden. They are not stupid, to start a headlong attack without slow corruption to soften the way."

"You've obviously been thinking about this for some time," Sameena says with dry emphasis. "What's in it for your friend, uh, Blue? Did you squirrel away enough credit to cover the price of renting a starship from the Economics 2.0 metabubble? Or is there something you aren't telling us?"

"Um." Manfred looks like a small boy with his hand caught in the sweet jar. "Well, as a matter of fact—"

"Yes, Dad, why don't you tell us just what this is going to cost?" Amber asks.

"Ah, well." He looks embarrassed. "It's the lobsters, not Aineko. They want . . . some payment."

Rita reaches out and grabs Sirhan's hand: he doesn't resist. "*Do you know about this?*" Rita queries him.

"*All new to me.* . . ." A confused partial thread follows his reply down the pipe, and for a while, she joins him in introspective reverie, trying to work out the implications of knowing what they know about the possibility of a mutual relationship—

"They want a written conceptual map. A map of all the accessible meme-spaces hanging off the Router network, compiled by a single human mind who they can use as a baseline, they say. It's quite simple—just fork a copy of the author to each Router we probe and have him return a finished draft before broadcasting himself to all the nodes linked to that particular Router."

"Do they have a particular author in mind?" Amber sniffs.

"Yes," says Manfred. "I'm used to being a multiplicity." He pauses, unhappily. "Right after I finally got myself together again. . . ."

The pre-election campaign takes approximately three minutes and consumes more bandwidth than the sum of all terrestrial communications channels from prehistory to 2008. Approximately six million ghosts of Amber, individually tailored to fit the jib of the targeted audience, fork

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across the dark fiber meshwork underpinning all of the lilypad colonies, then out through ultrawideband mesh networks, instantiated in implants and floating dust motes to buttonhole the voters. Many of them fail to reach their audience, and many more hold fruitless discussions; about six actually decide they've diverged so far from their original that they constitute separate people and register for independent citizenship, two defect to the other side, and one elopes with a swarm of highly empathic modified African honeybees.

Ambers are not the only ghosts competing for attention in the public zeitgeist. In fact, they're in a minority. Most of the autonomous electoral agents are campaigning for a variety of platforms that range from introducing a progressive income tax—nobody is quite sure *why,* but it seems to be traditional—to a motion calling for the entire planet to be paved, which quite ignores the realities of element abundance in the upper atmosphere of a metal-poor gas giant, not to mention playing hell with the weather. The Faceless are campaigning for everyone to be assigned a new set of facial muscles every six months, the Livid Pranksters are demanding equal rights for sub-sentient entities, and a host of single-issue pressure groups are yammering about the usual lost causes.

Just how the election process anneals is a black mystery—at least, to those people who aren't party to the workings of the Festival Committee, the group who first had the idea of paving Saturn with hot-hydrogen balloons—but over the course of a complete diurn, almost forty thousand seconds, a pattern begins to emerge. This pattern will systematize the bias of the communications networks that traffic in reputation points across the planetary polity for a long time—possibly as much as fifty million seconds, getting on for a whole Martian year (if Mars still existed). It will create a parliament—a merged group-mind borganism that speaks as one supermind built from the beliefs of the victors. And the news isn't great, as the party gathered in the upper sphere of the Atomium (which Manfred insisted Amber rent for the dead dog party) is slowly realizing. Amber isn't there, presumably drowning her sorrows or engaging in post-election schemes of a different nature somewhere else. But other members of her team are about.

"It could be worse," Rita rationalizes, late in the evening. She's sitting in a corner of the seventh floor deck, in a 1950's wireframe chair, clutching a glass of synthetic single malt and watching the shadows. "We could be in an old-style contested election with seven shades of shit flying. At least this way we can be decently anonymous."

One of the blind spots detaches from her peripheral vision and approaches. It segues into view, suddenly congealing into Sirhan. He looks morose.

"What's *your* problem?" she demands. "Your former faction are winning on the count."

"Maybe so." He sits down beside her, carefully avoiding her gaze. "Maybe this is a good thing. And maybe not."

"So when are you going to join the syncitium?" she asks.

"Me? Join that?" He looks alarmed. "You think I want to become part of a parliamentary borg? What do you take me for?"

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"Oh." She shakes her head. "I assumed you were avoiding me because—"

"No." He holds out his hand and a passing waitron deposits a glass in it. He takes a deep breath. "I owe you an apology."

About time, she thinks, uncharitably. But he's like that. Stiff-necked and proud, slow to acknowledge a mistake, but unlikely to apologize unless he really means it. "What for?" she asks.

"For not giving you the benefit of the doubt," he says slowly, rolling the glass between his palms. "I should have listened to myself earlier instead of locking him out of me."

The self he's talking about seems self-evident to her. "You're not an easy man to get close to," she says quietly. "Maybe that's part of your problem."

"Part of it?" He chuckles bitterly. "My mother—" he bites back whatever he originally meant to say. "Do you know I'm older than she is? Than this version, I mean. She gets up my nose with her assumptions about me. . . ."

"They run both ways." Rita reaches out and takes his hand—and he grips her right back, no rejection this time. "Listen, it looks as if she's not going to make it into the parliament of lies. There's a straight conservative sweep, these folks are in solid denial. About 80 percent of the population are resimulants or old-timers from Earth, and that's not going to change before the Vile Offspring turn on us. What are we going to do?"

He shrugs. "I suspect everyone who thinks we're really under threat will move on. You know this is going to destroy the accelerationists' trust in democracy? They've still got a viable plan—Manfred's friendly lobster will work without the need for an entire planet's energy budget—but the rejection is going to hurt. I can't help thinking that maybe the real goal of the Vile Offspring was to simply gerrymander us into not diverting resources away from them. It's blunt, it's unsubtle, so we assumed that wasn't the point. But maybe there's a time for them to be blunt."

She shrugs. "Democracy is a bad fit for lifeboats." But she's still uncomfortable with the idea. "And think of all the people we'll be leaving behind."

"Well." He smiles tightly. "If you can think of any way to encourage the masses to join us . . ."

"A good start would be to stop thinking of them as masses to be manipulated." Rita stares at him. "Your family appears to have been developing a hereditary elitist streak, and it's not attractive."

Sirhan looks uncomfortable. "If you think *I'm* bad, you should talk to Aineko about it," he says, self-deprecatingly. "Sometimes I wonder about that cat."

"Maybe I will." She pauses. "And you? What are you going to do with yourself?"

"I—" He looks sideways at her. "I can see myself sending an eigenbrother," he says quietly. "I'm not going to gamble my entire future on a bid to reach the far side of the observable universe by wormhole, though. I'll stash a copy of myself with the lobsters. What about you?"

"You'll go all three ways?" she asks.

"Yes. I think so. What about you?"

She shrugs. "One to stay behind, one to wait in the icy depths, and one to go exploring." She leans against him.

Then she says, "Me too." O

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old friends

we do not say what we mean,
and ours becomes
a dance of children
reluctant of the first step

unfinished business
and we nod
and we smile, saying
yes, exactly then
we change the subject

i realize that i
will not see yours
unless
i show you mine–
and although i want
to do both
i am afraid
to do either

naked,
but pretending otherwise,
no one mentions
that November
closes in on us,
as quick
as forgetting
and as final

if nobody says anything
and nobody moves
maybe it will all
go away

and maybe it won't

don't move

–W. Gregory Stewart

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

MEDALON Book One of the Hythrun Chronicles
by Jennifer Fallon
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-30986-6

Fallon's first fantasy novel was a bestseller in Australia, and it's easy to see why.

Most of the action takes place in Medalon, a nation whose government has expelled all worshipers of the pagan gods. Now the Quorum, a ruling council of women, runs the state on rational, atheist principles. R'shiel is a Probate of the Sisters of the Blade, the group from which the Quorum is drawn. Her older half-brother Tarja is a captain in the Defenders, battle-tested and canny, sworn to support the Quorum. Both are independent, and often at odds with their domineering mother Joyhina, a leading member of the Quorum.

After we meet those two, we are introduced to Brak, a halfhuman descendent of the Harshini, a magical race believed to be extinct. Brak is summoned by the gods and sent to find a mysterious "demon child," a half-human destined to lead the fight against the evil god Xaphista. The trail leads him inevitably to Medalon.

After a major power grab by Joyhina, Tarja and R'shiel have fled the Citadel and joined forces with peasants rebelling against the Quorum, which under Joyhina's rule has decided to enforce the ban on religion. The ban has been urged by Medalon's ally, the northern kingdom of Karien, where Xaphista's followers are in power. Meanwhile, Lord Jenga, the honorable but stiff leader of the Defenders, reluctantly carries out Joyhina's persecution, since he is bound by oath to obey the Sisters—and is under threats of blackmail for the actions of his disgraced brother.

Against them, Brak manages to enlist various of the gods (for whom he has little respect, knowing them all too intimately) to the cause of the young atheists. The plot rapidly takes on a load of complications. Before the end, the demon child's identity is revealed; the forces of Xaphista are temporarily defeated; and R'shiel and Tarja are ready to carry on the battle against the forces of oppression.

Fallon brings a fair quota of wit and a healthy dose of realism to the telling of the story, and while it has its share of first-novel flaws, I found this one hard to put down. I'll certainly be eager to see the next in the series.

TWO TRAINS RUNNING
by Lucius Shepard
Golden Gryphon, $22.95 (hc)
ISBN: 1-930846-23-1

The freight train was the imaginative forerunner of the rocket ship, a techno-marvel that could take a wanderer to new worlds. And the hobo, riding those magic rails without anyone's permission or approval, is an acknowledged model for the wanderings of the beats and hippies, not to forget generations of

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malcontents before them. Hundreds of folk tales and songs (such as the Muddy Waters blues from which Shepard's new collection takes its title) have built up the resonance of the railroad, even in an era when the trains' role in the national life has shrunk to a pale reflection of what it once was. So it's no surprise that Lucius Shepard has managed to inject a mythic buzz into the three pieces (two stories and an essay) that make up this collection.

The essay relates Shepard's investigation of the Freight Train Riders of America. This is a hobo organization described by law enforcement agencies, in terms they might use of Hell's Angels, as ruling the hobo jungles by murder and extortion. Most of the hobos Shepard talks to are skeptical of the lawmen's claims; hobos are by nature anarchists, allergic to any kind of social organization. While the FTRA undoubtedly has its share of nasty characters, as one hobo points out, so does your neighborhood bar. Shepard uses the essay to show enough of the hobo world to let the reader guess at the rest, then goes ahead to put it to use in fiction.

The longer of the two stories, "Over Yonder," features a burned-out wino, Billy Long Gone, who at first appears to have little in life to care about. Then in Klamath Falls, a stranger steals his dog, Stupid, and Billy chases him onto a strange black freight train. This starts him on a boxcar odyssey through surreal landscapes where savage creatures called Beardsleys attack the train. He ends up at a sort of magical hobo jungle—quite literally built in an enormous tree. Shepard uses this bizarre situation to highlight the reactions of thoroughly believable, if not quite everyday, people. The story won the 2003 Theodore Sturgeon award for short fiction.

The third piece, "Jail Bait," is without overt fantastic elements. The protagonist of the story, Madcat, is another burned-out loner. He meets an underage runaway girl who wants a man's protection while riding the rails. Again, the story deploys the elements of the hobo life to throw a harsh spotlight on the things comfortable middle Americans are likely to take for granted. Not a pleasant story, but a thought-provoking one.

Shepard remains a distinctive voice, whether he's writing fantastic fiction or straight journalism. Worth checking out.

QUEEN OF THE AMAZONS
by Judith Tarr
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-30395-7

Tarr is one of the original stars of the current revival of historical fantasy. This recent effort is her take on the legend that the Queen of the Amazons met Alexander the Great during his conquest of Asia. Told from the point of view of the Amazons, it effectively combines ancient history and fantastic speculation.

The event from which everything else in this novel springs is the birth to Hippolyta, reigning queen of the nation of women warriors, of a daughter who has no soul. Despite the opposition of both the tribe's seer (who refuses to give the girl a name) and of highly placed warriors, the queen declares the girl her heir, and appoints the protagonist, Selene, as one of a group to guard the baby. Selene has her own agenda; she has inherited the seer's gift, or curse as she sees it: inescapable

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and horrifyingly vivid dreams of future events. Then she learns that as long as she stays close to Etta (as the other Amazons nickname the Queen's girl), the dreams cease. That's all the incentive Selene needs to devote her time to caring for Etta.

Hippolyta's decision is, at least in the short run, a disaster for the rest of the tribe. A large group, under the leadership of the charismatic Phaedra, breaks away rather than accept that an apparent idiot has been designated their future leader. The rest are then even more firmly bound to Hippolyta. So when the queen decides to go see the Macedonian conqueror who has made his way into Asia, the rest of her tribe follows her. She meets Alexander and fights him to a draw in a test of arms; his interest piqued, Alexander takes the Amazons into his circle. Here, for the first time, Etta shows an interest in another person—a total fascination with Alexander, in fact. So when Hippolyta decides to return to her own country, she leaves Etta behind, and Selene with her.

Tarr gives a convincing portrait of Alexander's court at the height of his career of conquest, along with the personalities and politics that flowed around the man who set out to conquer the world.

Readers familiar with ancient history will likely be able to anticipate at least some of the later plot twists, but Tarr makes them not only believable, but interestingly worked out. And while this book ends quite satisfactorily, one senses the potential for further adventures in this fictional world; it would be interesting to see what else she might have in store for Selene and Etta.

¡LIMEKILLER!
by Avram Davidson
Old Earth, $30.00 (hc)
ISBN: 1-882968-26-3

This volume gathers together for the first time Davidson's stories of Jack Limekiller, a Canadian expat in a semi-mythical Central American nation called British Hidalgo. They derive in part from Davidson's own stay in former British Honduras (now Belize), one of the last outposts of the Empire in the New World, but the predominant flavor of the stories is direct from the author's own imagination.

Each of the seven stories begins with Limekiller at loose ends, on the search for work, money, or a good time. Eventually he goes to one of the wilder parts of the country—up one of the rivers, to an isolated plantation, and then to an offshore island—and undergoes an experience that suggests some supernatural force is at work. Each tale usually ends with Limekiller trying to make sense of what's happened, and feeling relieved that nothing worse went on.

What happens in between—in the numerous sections that, according to the book's publisher, ought to end with "But I digress," is where much of the real fun is. Limekiller runs into a huge cast of amusing characters, ranging from pukka-sahib British colonial types to Hidalgan natives with a bewildering variety of accents to American tourists, all with some kind of story (coherent or otherwise) to tell. It's a kick just listening with one's inner ear to the extremely mixed chorus of voices Davidson brings into the stories. The culture of Hidalgo is very laid-back, as well—companies set their own eccentric hours, the bars do a thriving business, and the

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entire country seems to have drifted very slowly down the time stream into the mid-twentieth century.

Between Davidson's delightful dialect, his odd bits of erudition (almost Lovecraftian, except Davidson's sources are as likely to be his own experience as his reading), and his lively interest in every detail of the quasi-fictional world he is building, it almost doesn't matter that the plots of all the stories are pretty much the same. These are rich, flavorful stories to be savored slowly, and one at a time.

TUNNEL IN THE SKY
by Robert A. Heinlein
Del Rey, $6.99 (tp)
ISBN: 0-345-46623-3

Why review a fifty-year-old book that everybody's already familiar with? Well, for one thing, this particular reviewer had (for shame!) never read *Tunnel in the Sky*; the chance to experience a classic Heinlein for the first time doesn't come along often, and I wasn't about to pass on it. Also, the Heinlein "juveniles" (as they're still universally known, though many current YA writers hate the label) remain one of the touchstones of the field. And since Del Rey has just repackaged the book as part of its Imagine program, presenting top SF for teen readers, the book has a fresh presence in the market. The book, unsurprisingly, holds up pretty well.

The setup is a society where transport gates have made interplanetary travel relatively easy; Earth has colonized a fair number of distant worlds, and is in the process of conquering more. To meet the strong need for pioneer types, survival training is a regular subject in school. As the story begins, Rod Walker and his classmates at Patrick Henry High read the announcement of the final exam in their Advanced Survival course; a ten-day field trip on an untamed alien planet.

Rod and his friends discuss the exam, choose supplies and weapons, and meet with their instructor—a mentor of a familiar Heinleinian type. The big day comes, and Rod goes through the gate, to find himself in a dangerous alien world. Soon, he finds a well-armed fellow student dead a short distance from the starting point. It gradually becomes clear that something serious has gone wrong; the pickup point, supposedly within ten miles of the dropoff, doesn't appear. Rod and a handful of his fellow students are marooned on a strange planet, with no immediate hope of rescue.

What happens next is pure Heinlein; the students pull together and build their own society. Problems range from dangerous native species to freeloaders to college kids who want to lord it over the teenagers. And the young colonists have to make do with the tools they brought with them, and a distinct shortage of the skills and knowledge needed to recreate their high-tech homeworld. Rod has the makings of a leader. And so the colony survives—at least until the "real world" reasserts itself, at which point he has further decisions to make.

Heinlein doesn't write down to his audience, except perhaps for the ending being somewhat more upbeat than a modern YA writer might think necessary. And even though the book was written in the middle of the conformist, family-values 1950s, he pulls no punches in following up the consequences of his premise. The stranded kids play the same kinds of power games, get

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into the same kinds of sexual liaisons, and evolve a lot of the same bad habits as the adults on the worlds they left behind. Heinlein deals with these matters tastefully but straightforwardly—in fact, this "juvenile" comes across in some ways as *more* mature than those later books where his treatment of "adult" subjects was too often marred by cuteness.

Heinlein even at his weakest is worth reading, although not all his fiction has stood the passage of years equally well. From a fifty-year perspective, *Tunnel in the Sky* would appear to have as much staying power as anything he wrote.

RESNICK AT LARGE:
Mike Resnick Speaks His Mind on Everything
by Mike Resnick
Wildside, $19.95 (tp)
ISBN: 1-59224-160-3

The subtitle tells it all: here's Resnick offering his opinions and observations on topics from horse racing to Tarzan to dog breeding to inside tips on African safaris. The various pieces appeared literally all over the map—everywhere from European con programs to risqué men's mags—and all (as far as I can tell) appear in book form for the first time here.

After an enthusiastic introduction by Robert Sawyer, Resnick has the field to himself. The contents are organized by their original place of publication, beginning with the dozen columns he wrote for the (now defunct) **Galaxyonline**. These give a fair sample of what's to come: the role of women in the SF field, the timeless appeal of the great pulp heroes, the endangered status of African game animals, pets of the future. . . .

Some of the best pieces here are his writings on SF writers. He's especially good on Edgar Rice Burroughs but he also has useful observations on Robert Sheckley, Eric Frank Russell, Olaf Stapledon, and a constellation of others, ranging from the giants of the field to names that even some of today's editors might not recognize at once. Nobody will agree with all his opinions, but he does a good job of suggesting the salient qualities of the works he likes. If you're of a mind to catch up on the classics you've missed, a look through the critical articles here might be a good preparation for your next trip to a used book dealer.

Likewise, his pieces on Africa ought to be on anybody's short list of "read this first" research materials, whether they're planning a trip or working up a fictional scenario. Not only has Resnick been there, he's looked at it with an SF writer's eyes, picking out the truly alien aspects of the landscape and cultures. In particular, check out the essay "On Ice Cubes, Ladies' Underwear, and Other Things Your African Guide Book Never Mentioned." If he ever runs out of ideas for fiction, he ought to go into the travel writing business.

It probably won't surprise anyone that the book ends with half a dozen articles on horse racing, written for a long-vanished men's magazine. Resnick's account of the match race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral, or his recollections of Kelso's valiant efforts in the Washington, DC, International, are classic sportswriting. Unfortunately, the articles were written too early (1966) to get his verdicts on some of the great races of the modern era: Secretariat's Belmont, or the neck-and-neck duels between Affirmed

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and Alydar. But look him up at some convention. Odds are he'll be glad to bring you up to date.

THE MAPMAKER'S WIFE
A True Tale of Love, Murder, and Survival in the Amazon
by Robert Whitaker
Basic Books, $25.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-7382-0808-6

The story of the first European scientific expedition to South America, and its extraordinary aftermath.

Whitaker begins his narrative in 1769 in the Andean city of Riobamba as Isabel Godin, with almost all of her possessions packed on a long train of mules, took the first steps on a three thousand mile journey down the Amazon River to meet her husband. Jean Godin had come to a northern province of Peru (now part of Ecuador) as one of a group of French scientists. Their primary mission was to measure a degree of longitude near the Equator, as a test of Newton's prediction that the Earth was an oblate spheroid, bulging around the middle.

Whitaker summarizes the credentials of the team's scientists, then follows them on their arduous journey to Peru, then still a Spanish colony. At the same time, he recreates the early years of Isabel Grameson, second daughter of a wealthy and politically well-connected family. As with other Spanish colonies of the time, the top level of Peruvian society, primarily of "pure" Spanish descent, lorded it ruthlessly over the lower classes, who were usually of Indian or mixed heritage. The French scientists were at first welcomed as representatives of European culture. Predictably, they ran afoul of local custom and prejudices; one of them was murdered in broad daylight by an angry Peruvian mob after a bullfight. Their measuring job also turned out to be much harder than imagined; none of them had the vaguest idea what Andean conditions were going to demand of them.

After seven years, they accomplished their goal. Meanwhile, Jean Godin, a young assistant, had married Isabel, who had long nourished dreams of the high culture of Paris. As the lead scientists returned to Europe, Godin stayed behind, but fell into financial troubles. Hoping that friends in France would bail him out, he traveled down the Amazon to French Guiana, where for nearly twenty years he barraged the King—or anyone who would listen—with begging letters. Isabel meanwhile stayed with her family, raising a daughter who died without ever seeing her father.

At last, Godin found a way to bring his wife to him—although it meant traveling down the Amazon, a journey no European woman had ever made. The trip turned into a nightmare. Isabel, who probably had never spent a night outdoors, was stranded in the Amazonian jungle, subject to disease and parasites, and surviving by pure luck (most of the rest of her party deserted her or died). Her rescue and final reunion with Godin, and their eventual return to France, come almost as an anticlimax. Whitaker makes their story come alive, and in the process draws a portrait of a time and place stranger and more compelling than most made-up worlds you've read about.

Both the scientific and social narratives are stunning; highly recommended. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

Things slow down as people save up for WorldCon, so here's a look into fall. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 2004

5–8—**A Commonwealth of SF.** For info, write: **Butler, D28, A&M, BCUC, HP11 2JZ, UK.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) homepages.enterprise.net/ambutler/acosf (E-mail) andrew.butler@bcuc.ac.uk.** Con will be held in: Liverpool (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Foresight Centre. Guests will include: Nalo Hopkinson.

6–8—**ConVersion. con-version.org.** Westin, Calgary AB. Author G. R. R. Martin, cabaret artists Arrogant Worms.

6–8—**ConGlomeration. conglomeration.org.** Clarion (formerly Hurstborne), Louisville KY. Low-key relax-a-con.

6–8—**Gathering of the Gargoyles. gatheringofthegargoyles.com.** Montreal QE. For fans of the Disney TV show.

13–15—**ArmadilloCon. (512) 477-6259. fact.org.** Hilton North, Austin TX. Sharon Shinn, *Analog*'s Stanley Schmidt.

20–22—**Anime Pacific, 2339 Kern #177, Fresno CA 93721. geocities.com/fresnoanimecon2003.** Radisson.

20–22—**PalatineCon, c/o Recktenwald, am Kurpark 7a, Lenzkerch 79853, Germany. palatinecon.de.** Neustadt.

20–23—**DiscworldCon, Box 102, Royston SG8 7ZJ, UK. (0) 7092 394-940. dwcon.org.** Hanover, Hinckley. Pratchett.

21–22—**Japan National Con, Motosu Gun, Sunami Cho 1569 Gifu 501 - 0322, Japan. members.aol.com/gconsf43.**

21–23—**VulKon Heroes & Wizards, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** LotR, etc.

27–29—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-8905. buboniCon.com.** Our own Gardner Dozois.

27–29—**ConTemplation, Box 28, Columbia MO 65205. contemplation-inc.org.** Best Western Columbia Inn.

27–29—**Creation Buffy/Angel, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com.** Chicago IL.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $180+.

3–6—**DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (770) 909-0115.** Hyatt, Atlanta GA. Comics, gaming, SF. Huge.

3–6—**Mephit FurMeet, Box 190512, St. Louis MO 63119. mephitfurmeet.org.** Airport, Memphis TN. Rog Minotaur.

10–12—**CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. coppercon.org.** Embassy Suites North, I-17 and Greenway.

17–19—**Nan Desu Kan, 1552 Monroe, Denver CO 80206. ndk.cc.** DIA Airport Holiday Inn, I-70 and Chambers. Anime.

24–26—**FenCon, Box 560576, The Colony TX 75056. info@fencon.org.** L. Niven, R. Caine, Cat Conrad, P. N. Elrod, G. Oliver.

30–Dec. 3—**Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. stlf.org.** Collinsville IL. A. D. Foster, Ben Bova, V. Di Fate.

OCTOBER 2004

1–3—**Arcana, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. pages.prodigy.net/rekal.** St. Paul MN. Tim Powers.

7–10—**BoucherCon, c/o 507 S. 8th, Philadelphia PA 19147. bouchercon2004.com.** Toronto ON. World mystery con.

15–17—**CapClave, c/o 4080 S. 8th, Arlington VA 22204. (703) 734-3200.** Marriott, Tysons Corner VA. Butch Honeck.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $170/£95.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $75.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125.

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NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER ISSUE

October/November is our immense Special Double Issue, often hailed as the best issue of the year. This issue contains considerably *more* fiction for a *lower* price than the average novel—three long stories alone provide more wordage than most books—we also offer novelettes, short stories, excellent reviews and critical articles, poetry, and cartoons. You can't afford to miss this issue if you want to keep up with the stories that everybody's going to be talking about *next* year.

George R.R. Martin, author of the acclaimed *A Game of Thrones* series, pens an intensely personal memoir of the forces that shaped his career, as he reveals "The Heart of a Small Boy." Our cover story by **William Barton** takes us to a frightening world where people must struggle to survive in the face of ordinary things now turned into monstrous threats, in "Though I Sang in My Chains Like the Sea." **Charles Stross** brings his "Accelerando" sequence (which has included three Hugo finalists), one of the greatest feats of sustained imagination in the history of SF, to a triumphant close in "Survivor," taking us to a strange habitat deep in a posthuman future, for a Macx family reunion (of sorts). Then **Allen M. Steele** returns with the penultimate story in his popular "Coyote" series, taking us back to his Civil War-torn frontier planet for results that nobody could have predicted, and that will leave nothing unchanged, in the unforgettable story of "Liberation Day."

ALSO IN OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER

Michael Swanwick takes us back to the evocative *milieu* of his novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* for a sinister account of what happens to those who are forced to hear "The Word That Sings the Scythe"; **Kage Baker** follows harried Company agents as they strain every terrifying seam trying to make "The Catch"; **Jack Skillingstead** spins a bizarre PI story in "Scatter"; **Mary Rosenblum** explores a high-tech future where the human problems turn out to be much more than "Skin Deep"; **Chris Beckett** takes us into the head of a woman in crisis as she realizes that "We Could Be Sisters"; **Paul Di Filippo** shuttles us Sideways In Time for the highly entertaining (if unlikely) adventure of "Sisyphus and the Stranger"; **Robert Reed** gives us a preview of a near-future where people suffer "A Change of Mind"; **Colin P. Davies** makes a vivid *Asimov's* debut relating the unsettling saga of "The Defenders"; and **Geoffrey A. Landis** offers us a sharp meditation on what's "Perfectible."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" examines some stuff that is truly "Far Out"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books." Look for our **huge** October/November Special Double Issue on sale on your newsstand on September 7, 2004. Subscribe today and miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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